

Is My Pet Fat?

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Today, there is a disease epidemic affecting our nation's pets, one you may not have heard of. It's not infectious, but households with more than one pet often have multiple affected animals. It's easily diagnosed, but if not addressed it can contribute to other serious and potentially even fatal medical conditions. There's no vaccine available, but this disease is treatable, even curable. It's called obesity, and your pet might have it too.

Right now you're probably thinking: "Really? This sounds alarmist – how bad can it be?" The answer is that it's actually pretty bad. In the United States, 52.5% of our dogs and 58.3% of our cats are either overweight or obese.* **That breaks down to over 40 million dogs and over 50 million cats.***

We've established that the majority of our nation's beloved dogs and cats are overweight, but let's talk about why it matters. Why is this important? It matters because in pets, just as in people, being overweight or obese can contribute to a whole host of serious medical conditions. Research has clearly documented that overweight pets are more likely to suffer from kidney disease, arthritis, and diabetes.* In fact, overweight cats are four times more likely to become diabetic than cats of normal body weight!* We all know how much cats hate getting vaccines – imagine having to give your cat insulin injections twice a day, every day, and bringing it in for blood testing every few months. Sounds like fun, doesn't it? Overweight dogs are more likely to suffer a ligament tear in their knee(s) that can be very painful and may require expensive surgery (the dog version of our ACL).* Overweight animals are also more likely to have cardiac or respiratory disease – think of the overweight pug who struggles to breathe in warm weather. Being overweight can even shorten a pet's lifespan, in part due to the many other diseases that come with obesity.* It matters a great deal.

Now you know it's important. But are your pets overweight? How can you tell? Many pet owners can't – 45% incorrectly categorized their pets as "normal weight" when they were not.* However, learning how to assess your pet's body condition at home is simple, and by the time you're done reading this article, you'll be able to do it with ease.

When it comes to assess a pet's weight, the term veterinarians used is Body Condition Score, or BCS. There are multiple standardized scales out there for evaluating BCS, but the most commonly used is a 1-9 scale. Using this scale, 1 = emaciated, 4-5 = ideal, and 9 = severely obese. Even if you don't feel comfortable assigning an exact score, you can use the guidelines for this scale to figure out if your pet is too skinny, too chubby, or just right.

Grading a pet's BCS is a combination of observation and actually handling the pet. Start by looking at your pet while they're standing, both from the side and from above, looking down on them. When viewed from above, they should have an hourglass waist visible, tucking in just behind the ribcage. If they look rectangular or egg-shaped, they're too chubby. From the side, your pet should have what's

known as an “abdominal tuck”, where the line of their body angles up behind the ribcage. This tuck is generally more evident in dogs than in cats. If there’s no tuck, or if your pet has a pendulous, low-hanging abdomen, there’s a problem.

Now it’s time to lay on hands. Run your hands gently over your pet’s ribcage, using both hands to feel both sides. Can you feel their ribs? How much padding does your pet have over their ribcage? A fit dog or cat should have ribs that are easily felt, with only a thin layer of fat covering them. One analogy veterinarians like to use is the hand analogy. Take your left hand and extend the fingers out, palm up. With your right hand, run your index and middle finger over the fleshy pads at the top of your left palm, where the palm meets the fingers. Cushy, right? If that’s what your pet’s ribs feel like, they’ve got too much padding. Now flip your left hand over and curl it into a fist. Run your right index and middle finger across the knuckles at the base of your hand. Those knuckles feel quite prominent, with deep ridges in between them. If your pet’s ribs are that prominent, they might be a bit too thin, so you should bring them in for evaluation. Now extend your fingers out, and run your right index and middle finger over those same knuckles again. You can still feel them, but without the deep ridges in between them. They’re noticeable, but not massively obvious. That’s about what your pet’s ribs should feel like.

“But she must be too thin, Doc – I can see her ribs!” That’s not necessarily true. Depending upon the build and body type of your dog, they may have slightly visible ribs even at an appropriate body weight. However, starkly visible ribs are not appropriate, and warrant a checkup.

A pet’s appetite is also not a consistent, reliable indicator of whether they are at an appropriate weight. Many dogs and cats will eat past the point when they are full, just like people do. Others won’t finish all of their food, but that may be because you are feeding too much. Any questions about your pet’s appetite should be discussed with your veterinarian or with a veterinary technician.

Now you know how to assess your pet’s body condition, but if they’re overweight, what can you do about it? That will be the topic of our next article, so stay tuned!

If you’re more of a visual learner, take a look at the charts below for another BCS review. Purina also has a terrific interactive online tool to help you assess your pet, available for both [cats](#) and [dogs](#). If you’re still not quite sure how to score your pet, just let us know - we’d be happy to help!

**Data provided by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention*

Body Condition Scoring Charts

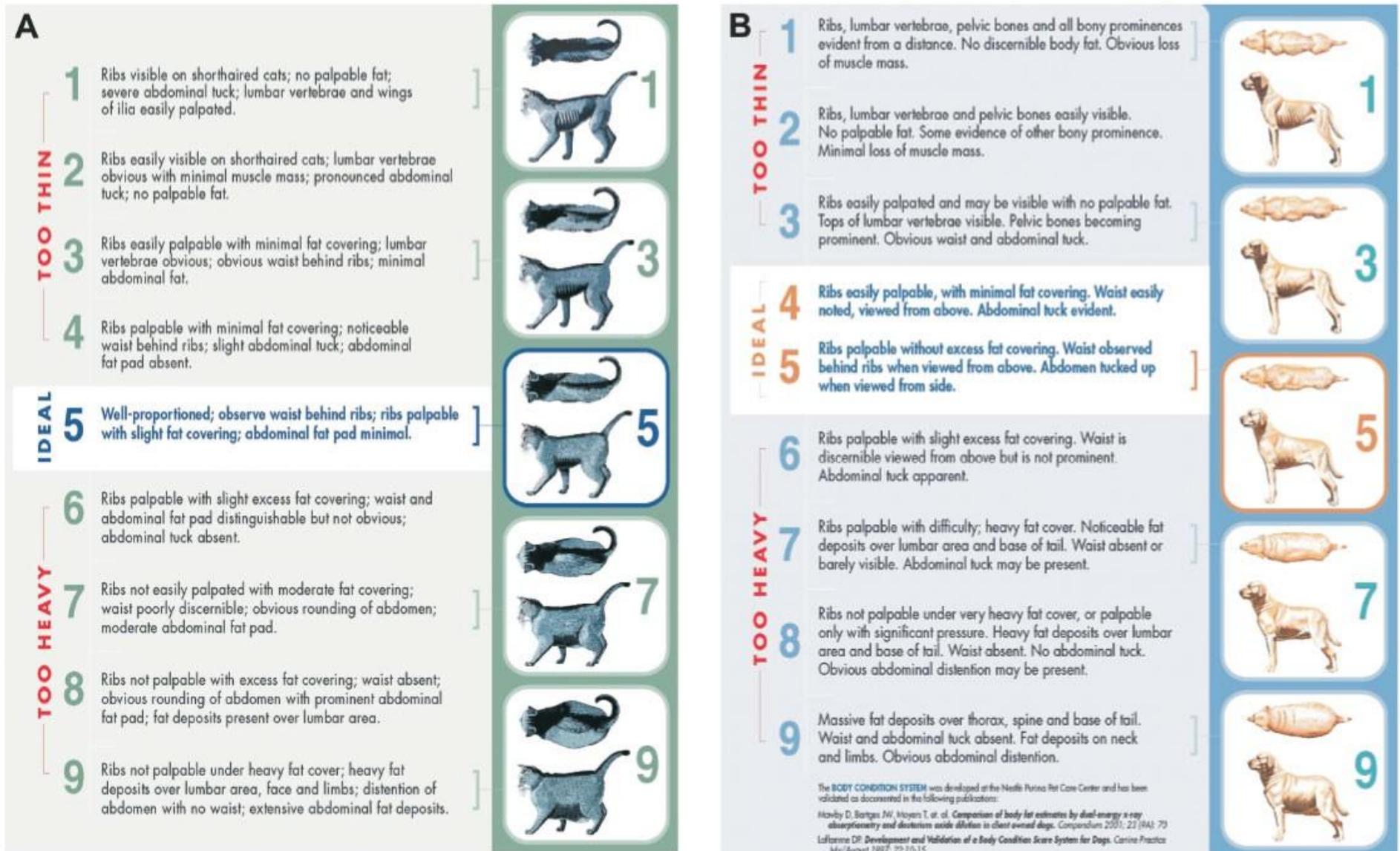


Fig. 2: Body condition scoring (BCS) system for dogs (A)¹³ and cats (B)¹⁴.