

## When Tiny Isn't So Tiny Anymore

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We've established that your pet is overweight. Now let's face the facts: they didn't get that way without help, and they're not going to lose weight without help, either. So how to tackle this topic? Let's break it down into its three basic components: diet, treats, and exercise.

*Before we get started, please be advised that the following information pertains to adult dogs and cats. If you have weight or feeding questions about your growing puppy or kitten, please ask your veterinary team.*

### Diet

If your pet is overweight, you're probably overfeeding them. We also call this "overnutrition", which means that the animal is receiving more nutrients and calories than are needed. Extra calories turn into extra pounds, and *voila*, you've got a pudgy pet.

The first rule of thumb is **no free-feeding**. Free-feeding or free-choice feeding is when you simply refill the bowl whenever it's empty, regardless of when or how quickly it was emptied. This approach is not a good idea, as it facilitates weight gain and makes it hard for you to monitor your pet's appetite as a potential indicator of illness. Measure the meals. If you have more than one pet in the house, be sure to feed them separately so that you can control food intake. Even if you're feeding them the same type and quantity of food, housemates have been known to snack from each other's dish. Pets who graze should be encouraged to finish their food within a reasonable time frame and then the food picked up, to eliminate snacking by the wrong pet. If you leave food out for your cat, you place it on an elevated surface (such as a dishwasher) that your cat can reach without having to worry about the dog stealing her dinner.

"But I'm feeding what it says to feed on the back of the bag, Doc!" The dietary recommendations listed on an average bag of food are guidelines only, and for an adult spayed or neutered dog or and cat they are often more than that pet really needs. That being said, not all foods are the same: calorie counts vary wildly from food to food, and many have different digestibility profiles.

Our weight loss goal for any given animal is approximately 3-5% of their body weight per month. Slow but steady wins the race, as crash dieting is no healthier for our pets than it is for us. Cats in particular can become extremely ill if they lose weight too quickly, so moderation is the key. Keeping this in mind, how many calories do they actually need in a day? That depends. First, we need to take into account how much your dog or cat **should** weigh. For that, you'll need to take them to the vet. Before you leave the house for your appointment, write down the exact brand and formulation of food or foods your pet is eating (also note what brands and types of treats, how many, and how often you give them) There are hundreds of different pet foods on the market and "the blue bag" is not specific enough. In order to help you calculate how much food you should be feeding your pet, your veterinary team needs to know what foods are being offered.

After evaluating your pet, your veterinarian or veterinary technician will set a **goal weight**. Recommended calorie intake is based on this goal weight, using the following plan as a general guideline:

1. Divide the goal weight in pounds (lbs) by 2.2 to calculate the goal weight in kilograms (kg)
2. Use this goal weight in kg to calculate their Resting Energy Requirement in kilocalories (kcal):
  - Dogs:  $70 \times [(\text{ideal weight in kg})^{3/4}]$  or  $70 \times [(\text{ideal weight in kg}) \text{ to the } 3/4 \text{ power}]$   
*Simplified version for medium and large-breed dogs:*  
 $\text{RER in kcal/day} = 30(\text{body weight in kilograms}) + 70$
  - Cats: Use the dog formula and multiply the result by 0.8 to get your cats RER

If math gives you nightmares, your veterinary team will be happy to do this calculation for you, but here's a rough guideline of the results:

Dogs		Cats	
Goal Weight (in lbs)	kCal to feed/day	Goal Weight (in lbs)	kCal to feed/day
10	210	8	150
20	340	10	170
30	480	12	190
40	615	14	220
50	750		
60	890		

Somewhere on your pet's food container(s) a calorie count is listed in kcal per cup or per can. If you're having trouble finding the information, call the manufacturer and they'll gladly give it to you. Found it? Good – now it's time for a little more math. Let's say Pebbles weighs 25 lbs, but really ought to weigh 20 lbs. She eats a dry dog food with a calorie count of 440 kcal/cup. According to our formula, she should receive 340 kcal a day. If we divide the desired calorie count by the number of calories in each cup, we get the fraction of a cup Pebbles should eat each day. 340 divided by 440 is 0.77, which rounds to about  $3/4$  of a cup total each day. This presumes that Pebbles isn't getting treats or table scraps on a regular basis; if she is, we'll need to readjust. That will be addressed in the following section.

You are not starving your pet just by putting it on a diet. Some animals (Labrador Retrievers are one example) have little to no satiety response, and will continue to eat well past the point when they should be full. This goes for cats too. Pet food companies are good formulating foods to be extremely palatable, so that a pet will eat...and eat...and eat... It's akin to humans with potato chips – it is indeed difficult to eat a just a handful when you know full well you could eat the entire bag. So be strong - even if they look at you with those big, dark, sad eyes, don't give in! Be sure to divide your pet's total caloric intake into 2-3 meals a day. This will help keep them full for longer, and also helps maintain steadier blood glucose levels throughout the day.

What if you do the math and it turns out that you're already feeding the recommended amount (or less), but your pet isn't losing any weight? First, make sure you've given it a good 3 weeks at the adjusted amount. If there's still no progress, take a step back and think about what else could be at play:

- Are you measuring their dry food precisely using a measuring cup (for dogs) or a teaspoon or tablespoon (for cats)? If you're just eyeballing it, you're probably overfeeding.
- Make sure to use a level scoop, not a rounded one.
- Who's in charge of feeding this pet? If there is more than one person feeding, make sure everyone is on the same page. No "but he looked hungry so I gave him another half a cup" excuses. You might even need a little "Fluffy has been fed today" checklist so that your pet doesn't fool your roommate or significant other into thinking she hasn't had breakfast when you already fed her before you left for work. They can be terribly convincing creatures.

If you've accounted for all of the above questions and your pet still isn't losing weight, it may be time to readjust their diet plan, so follow up with your veterinary team. The food intake may need to be further reduced, or you may need to switch to a lower calorie diet.

When it comes to weight loss, pet food manufacturers know what you want to hear. There are many foods on the market with labels as "light," "healthy weight," or "reduced calorie". Be aware that this classification requires only that the food be reduced in fat and calories as compared to the standard version of that same diet. It does not always mean that the food is actually low in calories or fat. Many of them are, but it's up to you to read the label. If the baseline is a 500 kcal/cup food, even a 20% calorie reduction will result in a 400 kcal/cup food, too high in calories for most pets trying to lose weight.

From mealtime to snack time – in our next section, treats are on the menu. Treats

We've talked about dog and cat food, but now it's time to address another source of extra calories: treats and table scraps. This includes everything from dog biscuits to bits of cooked chicken; from leftover pizza crusts to the pieces of cheese you put your dog's pills in. These calories count too! Many owners are seemingly baffled by their pet's weight, as they feed what seems like a reasonable amount of pet food, but they are also feeding large quantities of treats and people food.

If you feed your dog or cat snacks regularly, take stock of how much, what type, and how often you are giving them. Check the box or bag and look at the calorie content. For human foods the USDA has a fantastic nutrient database with calorie count information at: <http://ndb.nal.usda.gov/ndb/>. Look them up – what you find may surprise you.

For example, let's take Greenies, one of the more popular treats on the market. "Petite" Greenies contain 51 kcal per treat, according to the company website. A 30-lb dog needs only 480 kcal a day to maintain body weight, so just one Greenie is more than 10% of their daily calorie intake! If treats are given on a regular basis and the amount of food given is not adjusted to compensate, that 30-lb dog will very quickly weigh more than it should. It doesn't take much. Similarly, an ounce of cooked rotisserie chicken is 52 kcal. Sure, your 8-lb cat loves it, but you've just given her 1/3 of her calorie intake for the day! As you can

see, these foods add up, and they add up fast. Many of us think nothing of giving our pet a treat several times a day, but that may not actually be what's best for their health.

So what can you do about it? First and foremost, take a step back and think about why you're giving your pet treats. Is it for training purposes, or are you just doing it because you feel like it? Many pet owners say that it's their way of showing affection to their pets, or giving them special treatment, but the truth is that most animals would rather have your love and attention than another cookie. How about throwing a ball or a toy mouse for a few minutes instead? Some pet owners give their pet extra treats because they feel guilty for not having played with them or taken them for a walk. This is a double whammy from a weight gain perspective, because not only did the pet not get their exercise (to be discussed in the next section), but now they've been given extra calories. Many of us believe wholeheartedly in the concept that "food is love." This is a wonderful idea, but it's important to understand that it is strictly a human construct. To your cat or dog, cuddle time is love too. So is playtime. They don't understand that you are trying to convey extra affection to them through food – all they know is that they're getting extra food, and who's going to turn that down? If your pet begs for food, try petting or playing with them instead of feeding them when they beg; they may find the attention just as satisfying.

Let's say you give your dog two large Milkbones, at the same time each day. A routine has been established and you'd rather not change it. These treats pack a whopping 115 kcal each. Instead of a whole bone, why not break it into small pieces and give your dog a piece instead, or trade down to the smaller 10 kcal treat size? There are many treats on the market that are less than 8 kcal per piece, and most of the larger ones can be broken into pieces. You don't necessarily have to disrupt your pet's routine, but neither do you have to load them up with calorie-rich snacks. Your dog or cat doesn't really care about how big the treat is; the fact that they're getting it is enough. Do keep in mind that unlike regular pet foods, treats often do not have a calorie count listed on the label. Some of this information can be found online – the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention has a [calorie count list of common dog treats](#). To get your answer, call the company and ask – they're happy to help!

Other treat alternatives include substituting healthy snacks like a few pieces of baby carrots (4-5 kcal each), air-popped popcorn without butter or salt (8 kcal per ¼ cup) or green beans (fresh, frozen or sodium-free canned and rinsed, 7-10 kcal per ¼ cup). Broccoli is a good snack too, but it can give some dogs gas, so don't overdo it. Some owners simply use their pet's regular kibble as treats – if you treat it as a snack, your dog will too. If your pet takes daily medication and you hide their pills in food, don't forget to consider that food as well when assessing their calorie intake. Large pieces of hot dogs are not necessary, nor are whole slices of American cheese. Less is more.

Giving your pet treats is not inherently a bad thing, but it should be done in moderation, and you may need to adjust their food intake to compensate. Your pet should receive no more than 10% of their total daily caloric intake from snacks, although you can give a bit over that if you're giving healthy veggies. If you're feeding an extra 10% in treats, reduce the amount of food you are feeding by 10% to compensate. Food is love, but so is keeping your pet lean and healthy so that they live longer.

## Exercise

Many pet owners freely admit that their dog or cat does not get enough exercise. Walking your dog every day is a great way for both of you to exercise and enjoy the fresh air. However, the pace at which most of us walk our dogs is not suitable for weight loss. A slow ramble, stopping every minute or two for “sniff breaks,” isn’t really enough. Keep your dog on a short leash and set a brisk pace, but one that you feel that you can comfortably maintain. Dr. Ward at the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention recommends aiming for a 12 to 15 minute mile (as opposed to the 22 or 25 minute mile of a casual saunter). Don’t let your dog stop and sniff everything in sight – at least, not on the first half of the walk. If you would prefer to take it a little more leisurely on the way back, you may do so, but at least the first half of the walk should be all business. If you’re already walking your dog regularly but aren’t seeing any weight loss, consider speeding up your pace, extending the length of your walks, or adding another daily walk. If your dog is out of shape and is not used to regular walks, start with short ones (5-10 minutes) and gradually increase their length. Once you’ve established a regular routine of walks, your dog won’t let you get away with skipping them.

Walks are not the only way to exercise your pet. Throwing a ball or other such toy in the backyard or in the house (carefully – we wouldn’t want you to break anything) can be a fun way to play together. For cats (and dogs), using a laser pointer can provide lots of exercise and entertainment – just be sure to let them “catch” it every once in a while. Kitty fishing rods, feathers or fleece ribbons attached to sticks, paper bags and mouse toys are also a good way to play with and exercise your cat. Try to play with them for at least ten minutes twice a day. Do be careful not to leave ribbons out unattended, as some cats (including the author’s) have been known to eat them.

So far we’ve covered diet, exercise, and snacking. In the next (and last) segment, we’ll discuss the important of commitment to your pet’s new plan, and provide some tips to help guarantee your success.

## Follow-Up

One of the most important aspects of a weight loss plan is owner commitment. Your pet will not lose weight without your help and follow-through. This includes sticking with a diet and exercise plan, but it also means monthly weigh-ins with your veterinary team. For dogs, this should be done in person. Ideally, your cat should come in monthly as well, but some kitties find going to the vet an extremely stressful experience. If yours is a “fraidy-cat”, buy a baby scale so that you can weigh them regularly at home. Human scales are not sensitive enough for our feline friends. Weigh your cat every 3 to 4 weeks (or more often if you so choose), and call or email the numbers to your veterinary team so that they can work with you to adjust the plan as needed. Remember that it is especially important for chubby cats to lose weight slowly, as rapid weight loss can cause severe liver disease. Your cat should lose no more than 1-1.5% body weight each week. For a 10-lb cat, this is a rate of approximately 0.1 lb a week, or half a pound per month.

Who doesn't like charts? The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP) has one [here](#) to help you keep track of food and exercise for your pet. It's labeled for dogs but who says cats can't use it too? There are also great articles at [APOP's website](#) that you can browse at your leisure.

Whatever your pet's current weight, whatever your goal for them, and no matter your lifestyle, you can help them lose weight. Just remember that that your veterinary team is here to help you each and every step of the way!