

The SECRET LIFE OF PETS & Human Obesity

by Ernie Ward, DVM, CVFT



There's a secret life of pets that we don't often talk about. The secret begins with the fact that over half the nation's dogs and cats are now classified as having overweight or obesity by their veterinary healthcare provider. Nearly 59 percent of cats (50.5 million) and 54 percent of dogs (41.9 million) are at risk for weight-related health disorders.

In addition to pet obesity and its associated illnesses and complications, I've also been uncovering another secret of pet obesity: inflammation. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that inflammation is the new "obesity" and is also the real secret we need to reveal to both pet parents and the public.

I've been studying pet and humans affected by obesity for the past 20 years. During that time, I've witnessed the pet obesity discussion evolve in the following way:

- "Fat is funny"
- "Fat is deadly"
- "Fat is boring"

Many people ignore warnings about pet obesity in the same way they ignored the fatal risks of smoking for decades. Deep down, most folks know that obesity is dangerous; they just don't think anything bad will happen to them or their pet. Psychologists call this phenomenon "optimism bias," or the belief that you or your pet is at less risk for harm evidence of the contrary. While this is a necessary coping mechanism that allows us to get through our days, it also gets in the way of change.

For more than five years, I've begun changing the way I describe obesity to clients and veterinarians. Pet owners usually see a "big pet." Most veterinarians see a "fat pet." I see inflammation. The real danger of obesity in pets and people isn't the fat; it's the inflammation the fat causes. That's what I've been communicating the past few years: reducing chronic inflammation associated with obesity should be our true medical objective.

I've been teaching pet owners and veterinary professionals for two decades not to chase a number on a scale, but to focus on improving quality of life and decreasing disease risk. What this really means is to take measures to help reduce obesity-related inflammation. Fortunately, this is one area in which the media is helping.

The popular press has latched onto the idea that inflammation is bad. Rarely does a week pass without a story on inflammation making the news. This public awareness offers physicians and veterinarians an opportunity to pivot the conversation from "You or your cat is affected by

obesity” to “You or your cat is experiencing severe systemic inflammation caused by obesity.” That helps remove the stigma associated with “obesity” and allows us to focus on addressing the underlying medical problems and improve quality of life.

I’m so passionate about helping pets with obesity because I’ve witnessed the toll it takes on their quality of life. In my pet obesity book appropriately titled, *Chow Hounds*, I speculate dogs affected by obesity must feel lousy most of the time. This is based on studies of humans suffering from obesity who confront chronic fatigue, malaise, decreased energy and vitality, and a laundry list of aches and pains. I can’t imagine pets with obesity feel any better. I think it’s time we clearly convey to pet owners how lousy obesity makes pets feel.

In addition to feeling lousy, pets with obesity are more likely to develop type 2 diabetes and insulin resistance. Hypertension and kidney disease are also common, especially in cats diagnosed with obesity. Managing these conditions in pets can be challenging, even for the most dedicated pet lover. Administering insulin injections and blood pressure medications requires patience, persistence and lots of veterinary checkups. The great news is that these diseases can often be prevented by proper nutrition, an active lifestyle and maintenance of a healthy weight.

Arthritis and joint problems are also common in pets enduring obesity. The hips, knees, shoulders and elbows of dogs and cats are commonly affected. Dogs affected by obesity are much more likely to suffer severe arthritis pain and debilitation. Arthritic cats can cleverly hide their pain until the disease is advanced. Recent research has shown that most cats with obesity have joint damage. Sadly, that’s not the worst consequence of obesity.

“Obesity is perhaps the most complex and challenging medical condition in both human and veterinary medicine, and ultimately one of the most important.”



Cancer is also now recognized as a result of obesity. While studies in dogs and cats are currently lacking, the physiological connection between laboratory animals, humans and cancer is clear. Human and animal doctors need to more openly discuss the emerging evidence that links many cancers and obesity with patients and clients. And that leads us to the biggest challenge of all in the fight against human and pet obesity.

I believe the biggest adversary in the war on pet obesity is silence. Many veterinarians complain they aren't comfortable talking about a pet's weight for fear of accidentally offending the client. Physicians grumble that patients don't change. I understand their concerns, but I urge my veterinary colleagues to forget fat and start talking about inflammation and disease.

I also ask doctors to continue talking to their patients who are affected by obesity. Overcoming obesity is not a simple task; it requires commitment, exploration and adaptability. We must evolve until we find the perfect balance between science and language, promotion and procedures, health and happiness. The challenges of overcoming human and pet obesity can be difficult, and this is why human and veterinary medical forces must unite to preserve the human and animal family.

It's also time that veterinarians reshape the pet obesity conversation. I'm calling on my profession and the human medical community to help me accomplish the following:

1. DEFINE PET OBESITY. Obesity has been defined for humans with clinical terms for years. This has helped doctors discuss associated risks with patients who are affected by. Currently, veterinarians can't define what "clinical obesity" is in animals. This confuses and clouds the issue. We don't have a consensus for the terms "overweight" and "obesity." I'm officially offering the independent organization, the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, to help jumpstart the conversation.

2. STANDARDIZE BODY CONDITION SCORES (BCS). BCS is the pet world's closest equivalent to Body Mass Index (BMI). There are at least three major dog and cat BCS scales used worldwide. I'll be the first to agree that there are limitations to the BCS. The advantages are that the BCS is simple to administer, works well in most situations and is already widely accepted and used in clinical practice. Our profession needs to come together and settle on one scale and move forward.

3. DEFINE PET OBESITY AS A DISEASE. The American Medical Association (AMA) officially defined obesity as a human disease in 2013. I'd like to see the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA), and other global organizations follow. I believe classifying pet obesity as a disease would ultimately encourage more veterinarians to talk about the condition and inspire our industry to develop better solutions.

4. DEFINE PREDIABETES. For years, I struggled with the concept of "prediabetes" until I started evaluating studies on people diagnosed with prediabetes. Screening and discussions appear to raise awareness of diabetes and offer a potential early intervention point for clinicians. There's growing evidence that we may be able to apply the prediabetes strategy in veterinary medicine, especially in cats with obesity. There are useful veterinary biomarkers that could help general practitioners identify at-risk pets earlier.

5. DEVELOP BETTER TECHNOLOGY. We need a technological solution to quickly and accurately assess body fat composition in dogs and cats. We desperately need improved tools for tracking weight, BCS and dimensions in pets who are affected by obesity.



“The challenges of overcoming human and pet obesity can be difficult, and this is why human and veterinary medical forces must unite to preserve the human and animal family.”

CONCLUSION

This is only a glimpse into the secret lives of pet and human obesity. Obesity is perhaps the most complex and challenging medical condition in both human and veterinary medicine, and ultimately one of the most important. Obesity affects nearly everyone – human and animal – in some harmful manner, steals billions in medical bills, and robs quality of life and life expectancy for hundreds of millions. That’s why the battle to cure obesity is so important and why I’m committed to fighting it. Let’s combine veterinary and human medical efforts to benefit the people, children and pets with obesity we love and cherish. Ultimately, the real secret I want to share is a healthier and happier future for all living things.

About the Author:

Ernie Ward, DVM, CVFT, is an award-winning practicing veterinarian who has devoted his career to improving veterinary medical standards, developing a higher quality of life for animals and sharing healthier habits for pets and people.





ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



JOIN TODAY: GO TO OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN

info@obesityaction.org

(800) 717-3117 | (813) 872-7835 | Fax: (813) 873-7838



@ObesityActionCoalition

@ObesityAction