RU Losers: K9 Edition

A weight loss program for you and your pet!

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Summary

In the United States, not only has weight and obesity become a problem for people, but it is also now a problem for pets. Obesity is the number one nutritional disorder for dogs. It has been estimated that 40% of dogs in this country are either overweight or obese (1). It’s very easy to look at an overweight or obese animal and think of how cute it looks. However, like in humans, being overweight or obese carries serious risks for animals. An excellent way to facilitate weight loss for people and animals is through a support groups, such as our Facebook group, RU Losers: K9 Edition. This type of forum provides the support and motivation for people to make healthier permanent lifestyle choices for them and their pets.
The Issue: Obesity

Causes of Obesity in Pets
Obesity in pets is caused by several factors. The most common causes are excessive caloric intake and lack of exercise. Spaying and neutering can also play a huge role in weight gain, especially in older pets. Although spaying and neutering have its practical benefits, it slows down the animal’s metabolism and blocks the production of food inhibitory hormone, a hormone that stops the animal from overindulging (2). Also, just like humans, the metabolism of an animal slows down with age, which can be the reason for extra pounds.

Sometimes, animal obesity is a result of disease, such as metabolic disorders. Some of these include diabetes mellitus (insulin resistance), hypothyroidism, hyperadrenocorticism (Cushing’s Disease), and hypoadrenocorticism (Addison’s Disease). Hyperadrenocorticism has two types: pituitary dependent and adrenal-based. The disease produces excessive amounts of cortisol hormone and usually affects middle-aged or older dogs and cats, both male and female. Most of the time, this illness occurs simultaneously with diabetes mellitus (3). Hypoadrenocorticism is less common than hyperadrenocorticism, and is typically seen in young to middle-aged female dogs. Hypoadrenocorticism comes from a lack of corticosteroid secretion from the adrenal gland, and the disorder itself damages the adrenal glands (4).

Complications Associated with Obesity in Pets
Extra weight puts extra stress on organs such as the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, among others. As a result of this stress, the animals are more likely to suffer from cardiac disease, respiratory problems, digestive disorders, and hypertension. Arthritis, joint injuries, leg and back problems are also concerns because their joints, ligaments, tendons, and bones are also under excess stress (5). Should your pet have to undergo surgery, it becomes riskier with the extra weight. Overweight pets are also at risk for overheating, reproductive problems, and skin diseases.

Like with humans, obese animals are at risk for life threatening, chronic diseases. These include, but are not limited to, diabetes, Cushing's disease, pancreatitis, and liver disease. Along with making your pet sick and uncomfortable, these diseases require costly, long term treatment (6).

Aging will further complicate your pet’s life. Getting older will increase the severity of these problems and your pet’s quality of life will decline. Every day activities such as standing, walking, climbing stairs, running, and lying down will become burdening chores to your pet (5). They have an increased risk for developing fatty tumors. These tumors can further interfere with motion resulting in an even more uncomfortable pet (6).

Managing your pet’s weight is more important than most people realize. Overall, obese pets lead shorter, less comfortable lives than those kept at the proper weight. So while you may think obese animals look adorable, remember that your pet’s quality of life is at stake.

Diet and Weight Loss
Diet can play a large role in a weight loss program for dogs. As with humans, if a dog consumes more energy than it uses this is likely to result in weight gain. The excess energy intake may come from the quantity of dog food fed along with treats and table scraps fed to a dog. Energy
restriction has proven effective for weight loss in dogs, but this should be discussed on an individual basis with a veterinarian before starting a weight loss program. The best way to restrict calories is to feed a specifically formulated food for weight loss (7).

**Weight Loss Diets**
Many of the large pet food companies make varieties of food specifically for the promotion of weight loss. These commercial foods will usually have feeding guides based on a dog’s weight on the label. These types of food will often have less fat but are supplemented with other nutrients. They may be supplemented with protein to minimize loss of muscle, with fiber to increase satiety, vitamins and minerals to prevent deficiencies, and L-carnitine which may help metabolize fat. These foods may also be supplemented with certain fatty acids in order to help maintain healthy skin and coat which could be affected by feeding a low fat diet (7, 8).

It may also be necessary to decrease the amount that is fed to the dog. This can sometimes be challenging for the owner. A good way to start is to stop feeding table scraps and extra snacks. The recommended amount of food can be divided into a few smaller meals to be fed throughout the day. To better monitor the amount of food that the dog is eating, it is important not to leave food lying around and also if you have more than one pet to feed them separately (9).

**Weight Loss Drugs**
Recently, the FDA has approved dirlotapide, a weight loss drug for dogs which is sold as Slentrol. This drug is sold to be used in dogs who are more than 20% overweight. Slentrol works by reducing fat absorption and increasing satiety. This drug is intended to be used for three months after the goal weight is reached; therefore the drug needs to be used in addition to diet and exercise. The safety of this drug is not known beyond one year of use and side effects of use have been reported to include vomiting, loose stools, diarrhea, lethargy, anorexia, and elevated serum transaminase levels (1). Due to the risks involved with prescription weight loss drugs and the possible side effects, diet and exercise are a better option for your pet.

**EXERCISE**

**What are the benefits?**
The benefits of regular exercise for pets are endless. In addition to gaining social skills by interacting with you on a regular basis, pets with a regular exercise routine tend to act out problem behaviors less frequently. The bond between you and your pet will also be strengthened while you get to exercise right along side your animal. This will lead to improved health for both you and your pet, so that you can both live longer and healthier lives. They key is to build your exercise routine with your pet into each week just like you would plug in an appointment to the vet, go to class, or go to work each day. If you schedule it like any other appointment, the likelihood of deviating from it will be much less likely.

**What is optimal?**
For most dogs, experts recommend a thirty-minute routine at least four times a week. For a cat, fifteen minutes, once a day is sufficient for a cat of normal health. However it is important to keep in mind that if you suspect that your pet has any physical limitations, you should consult your vet before beginning any exercise routine (10).
Exercises for Dogs:
For most dogs, experts recommend a thirty-minute routine at least four times a week, although daily exercise is optimal. Walking is one of the simplest and most beneficial forms of exercise for both dog and owner. If possible try to stay on dirt or grass paths as too much walking or running on concrete can stress joints and irritate your dog's pads and also heat your pet up more quickly as the concrete absorbs heat. Other fun and easy exercises for both owner and pet include swimming, cycling, and obstacle courses. Swimming is a good low stress option, although a doggie life vest should be considered for safety. Cycling is a good option if you plan to keep your rides short as to not over exert your dog. An obstacle course provides a fun change of pace. You can set up an indoor course if it’s very hot outside, and when the weather permits you can increase the course and move it outdoors so you and your pet can both run (11).

Exercises for Cats:
Cats can be a little trickier because they type of play that they engage in is different than that of dogs. Cats engage in either social play, which is the romp, wrestle, and chase that you see between littermates or between cats living in the same household. Or they engage in object play, which is where they will stalk, pounce, chase and play with an object so they can kill it. Object play is what you should focus on when it comes to exercising your cat: feather toys, furry mice, toy balls, catnip toys, and laser toys all can all aid in getting your cat in the game. Whatever game you and your cat enjoy will work, just remember to keep up the pace for fifteen minutes (12).

Limitations:
If you suspect that your pet has any physical limitations, you should consult your vet before beginning any exercise routine. It is also important to remember that our pets are not as good at cooling down as we are since they release most of their body heat just through panting and their paw pads. So, keep them hydrated, keep sessions short, and keep an eye on them for signs of fatigue (10).

How Owners Habits Effect Their Pets
Obesity in dogs is caused by several factors. Nonetheless, one of the probable factors of obesity in domestic animals can be depicted with its positive correlation with obese pet owners. According to an article titled Obesity in Dogs written by Dr. Rebecca Remillard, 35% of dogs that are obese or suffer from or are even slightly overweight have pet owners that are obese or overweight. It is almost logical to predict that dogs with poor sedentary lifestyles are owned by owners who do not exercise or maintain a balanced diet: this is so because people who are less likely to go out for a walk are also less likely to consider walking a dog for thirty minutes or more. Moreover, one of the ways dogs can improve their diet and weight is if their owners take a serious initiative to changer their own lifestyles (13).

Care of Emaciated Dogs
Caring for an abandoned and starved dog may be a difficult task. The care and recovery process involved in emaciated pets is one which requires caution so as to not further neglect the animal by trying to help it. The best recommendation is to provide the animal with veterinary assistance as soon as possible. The dog may be suffering from a serious disease such as kidney failure, anemia, pancreatitis, or bowel obstruction, in which case veterinary care is inevitable. Poor diet,
parasites, and infections are other contributions to the dog’s present state. A veterinarian can provide one with necessary supplements that can be administered to the dog such as Vitamin E to help the body recover faster. Consulting a veterinarian is always best prior to providing personal care for the animal (14).

One should first give the dog small amounts of water to monitor his or her interest and ability to drink. Food should be given every 20 to 30 minutes, in small amounts; typically 15 to 20% of what one would normally feed a dog of this size. Puppy or high protein foods are best, if possible. The key is to not allow the dog to overeat himself. Many people feel that since the dog has been starved for so long, it is best to provide it with as much food as it can gorge down. Loading the dog with so many carbohydrates can create changes in potassium and phosphorous concentrations in the body cells and cause life threatening “Refeeding Syndrome”. Indications of Refeeding Syndrome include muscle weakness and cramps, heart muscle damage and rhythm irregularities, seizures, red blood cell rupture and respiratory failure. The stomach of a starved dog does not shrink. Instead, it becomes much more sensitive to stretch receptor nerve impulses. This sensitivity to the stomach's expansion will decrease within 3 to 7 days (15).

It is best that the dog stay away from other pets in the household until veterinary care is found. Rest is also a good remedy for the neglected pet. It should receive plenty of sleep in a warm environment. This will help them regain proper energy that they have been losing.

Weight loss and maintenance of a healthy weight is important for pets. The risks associated with being overweight, obese, or even underweight can be detrimental to your pet’s health, even causing their life to be shortened. Promoting a healthy weight can be done through diet and exercise. This will be beneficial to the pet and also can be beneficial for the pet owner. Pets make a great exercise companion, so you and your pet can work to reach a healthy weight together.

The Service Project

Becoming overweight or obese has become a problem for both people and their pets. As a group, we attempted to find a way to help simultaneously combat these problems in both pets and their owners. There are many obstacles with traditional weight loss programs including lack of support, false expectations, and limited motivation. All of these obstacles can make weight loss difficult, depressing, and lonesome. We strove to develop a program that is accessible to anyone interested to support pet owners in their own weight loss as well as the weight loss of their pet.

What makes our program stand out from the thousands of other weight loss programs that are available is that we are targeting weight loss for people and their pets. This allows people to have a companion who will always support them and never judge them. It also provides health benefits for both and can strengthen the bond between pet and owner. The owner and pet can each download a chart that we have created from our Facebook page in order to keep track of their food intake and the amount of exercise they complete every day. Together, they make the decision of what is best for their bodies. They can cut portions down, snack less, or exercise more. By making these decisions together, they are able to use each other as a buddy for support.
They aid and comfort without judging one another throughout their weight loss journeys. They help each other achieve a healthy weight, while spending time with their “best friend”.

We decided to use “Facebook” as the forum for our weight loss group. This was chosen because we wanted to have our site at a location that virtually everyone has access to. We also chose this website because it is free, as we had no startup capital to work with. On Facebook, we were able to develop a group entitled “RU Losers K9”. This site allows for members to have discussions, post photos, and enter weight loss challenges. It also provides information regarding weight loss and healthy eating tips for both pets and owners. While it is open to all types of animals, the primary focus is on dogs and dog owners.

The website offers a unique approach that helps individuals find motivation and support in order to accomplish their weight loss goals. Our ideal customers are middle-class American pet owners. Benefits of our group include providing a community to support people with common weight loss goals and a competition to further motivate participants.

The website works by offering a free community where people will find motivation and support from others who have similar goals and struggles. Once a person and their pet join, they will be able to share their journey through wall posts and discussion forums and follow other people’s journeys as they transform their lives and the lives of their pets. People will also be able to discover and share new healthy recipes and healthy snacks for both people and for dogs. Within the community, people can connect with other members to be each other’s motivators. Members will be encouraged to post updates of weekly progress and struggles on the group’s discussion boards. Members will be able to be motivators and show support for one another. The website offers downloadable charts to print out to track weight loss and fitness progress. These charts serve as a great source of motivation, as a person will be able to actually track their progress. Through this, group members will be able to build a support group when support is needed most.

Another aspect of the website is competition. RU Losers allows members to create weight loss or exercise competitions among other group members. Members can compete as individuals or as teams. This allows for members to build their competitions to how it best suites them and other members, and allows them to chose who they are competing with and what they are competing for. Examples of competitions that can be created are weight loss challenges, exercise competitions, and nutrition challenges. All over the country, community walks and road races are held to raise money for charities, which now often encourage pet owners to bring their dogs along. This is a great way to challenge people in your area to an exercise challenge in a fun and safe environment.

We have come up with a few ways that we can market our website to our target audience. There are many pet lover blogs online. We are advertising by blogging on several of these websites, providing a link to our Facebook group. This would allow us to reach an audience across the country and possibly, even in different countries. We would like to leave flyers at veterinary clinics and pet stores which would be directed towards the local community. However, in the future, if the website is successful we would hope to be able to send our flyers to veterinary clinics and pet stores all over the country. Another way we will be marketing is by adding friends to our Facebook page and encouraging them to add all of their friends, and in such,
having a sort of viral advertising occurring.

We do suggest to all members that they consult their doctor and their pets veterinarian before starting any type of weight loss or exercise program as there may be risks involved. Don’t wait any longer, join us today!

References


As most of us already know, obesity is a serious health issue that currently affects over half of our nation. Unfortunately, this widespread dilemma is no longer limited to humans – obesity in animals is also on the rise. On occasion, animal obesity is caused by some type of disease that stems from a bodily malfunction (such as diabetes mellitus, hyperadrenocorticism, or hyporadrenocorticism); however, this is not very common. An animal’s extra pounds are usually a result of overeating and lack of exercise – the same exact reason why many Americans are overweight. Simply letting your pet run around for a little longer than usual and being more aware of their food intake will definitely benefit the animal’s health in the long run. To trim down an overweight pet, their food portions should be gradually reduced – usually by approximately 25%. Obese animals suffer from joint pain and ultimately live shorter lives. Pets become an integral part of our families and we grow to love them just like any other family member. Therefore, we should pay more attention to their health and wellbeing, so that they can live better, happier lives.
Are You Loving Your Pet to Death?
by Justyna Marcinow

e-mailed to: AIM Jefferson (local community newspaper in my hometown)

Pet owners generally love their pets and oftentimes the animals are even considered part of the family. Unfortunately, it is becoming evident that many owners seem to be loving their pets to death, literally. Animal obesity, just like obesity in humans, is on the rise in our society. Statistics indicate that between 20 to 30 % of pets are overweight, a startling figure considering the fact that unlike us, most pets do not have health insurance to fall back on.

Owners give their pets treats and food as a means of showing their love and caring for the animals. However, when it goes beyond that, it starts to become a serious problem. Our pets typically spend the majority of their day in a pen, or a crate, or laying around the house, waiting for us to come home. Today’s society is very fast paced, and so sometimes our animals do not get the exercise they need. When we don’t have the time or energy to exercise and interact with our pets, oftentimes we feel guilty. Replacing attention and proper care with food limits this guilt. When Fido looks sad because he is bored and lonely, we feed him. When he looks sad again, we feed him again, and soon Fido is a very obese and very unhealthy dog.

If we love our pets then we should certainly want to keep them around longer. We should also want them to enjoy their lives and have enough energy to be able to run and play. Overweight and obese animals suffer from a number of weight related illnesses. Extra stress on the heart, lung, liver, and kidneys makes them more likely to suffer from cardiac disease, respiratory problems, and digestive disorders, as well as a number of other issues. Excess wear and tear on joints, ligaments, tendons, and bones can also lead to arthritis, joint injuries, and back ailments. In general, obese pets lead shorter, less comfortable lives than those kept at a healthy weight.

Just like it takes discipline to keep ourselves on a healthy diet and exercise plan, our pets need that same discipline. I’ve personally found that one of the best ways to do this is incorporating your pet into overcoming some of you own unhealthy lifestyle choices. Eat a healthy dinner while they enjoy their healthy pet food and go for a walk or jog with them before or after work to relax and relieve stress. Exercising with your pet is a great way to feel motivated to live a more active lifestyle and to have a lot of fun with your furry companion, promoting a longer and healthier life for both of you.

Recently news stories have shown people getting arrested for animal cruelty, and causing animal obesity should fall into that category. If you are an owner of an overweight pet, then now is the time to change their lifestyle. For an even greater benefit, incorporate your own change. Taking care of your animal’s health and long-term happiness shows much more love than passing them a table scrap.
Editorial regarding animal obesity
By Jennifer Borkowski
Sent to: tmoran@starledger.com

Are you noticing that your pet is a gaining a few pounds? Use your pet as a buddy to help him lose weight and get in shape yourself! It’s often difficult to lose weight on your own, so have your best friend do it with you to make it more fun and motivating! Join our facebook group ?RU Losers? today to get started on a buddy system for you and your dog!

Laura Mario

To Whom it May Concern:

I’m sure it has not escaped anybody’s notice that being overweight or obese is an increasingly prevalent problem in America. Despite factors like economic recessions and waves of research detailing the dangers of carrying extra weight, people continue to partake in unhealthy habits. However, this problem extends beyond humans and over to their pets as well.

As a sign of love and affection, it is not uncommon for people to feed their pets table scraps or a few treats or random bits of food that they think their pet will enjoy. This is all well and good except it is easy to forget that when our animals become overweight or obese, they run the same risks as people.

When looking at a large animal, it’s easy to see the rolls of fat and the pudgy belly and think, “Oh, how cute.” What you don’t see is the heart struggling to do its job, joints in pain because they weren’t meant to carry such a large frame, or the diabetes that this animal may eventually need treated on a daily basis. And this is only 3 of the numerous problems that can result from an overweight or obese pet.

I don’t doubt that these people love their pets, but they need to realize the dangers of their pet being overfed and under exercised. The medical problems will start with a strong financial impact and eventually lead to an aching heart when you have to watch the animal you love struggle just to stand up every day.

Ezinne Onukogu
Sent To: UMDNJ Department of Community Health
To whom it may concern:

Obesity is a very prevalent issue across America. Many factors such as lack of physical activity, poor nutrition, and even genetic predisposition take a toll in this issue. Nonetheless, there has also been a growing number of obesity in animals. In domestic animals such as dogs and cats particularly, there have been an increase of becoming overweight or obese. Moreover I would like to increase awareness because I feel as though several other factors contribute to animal obesity among domestic pets. Firstly, almost forty percent of overweight or obese dogs and cats are owned by overweight or obese pet owners. It would not be a surprise if a person who does not participate in physical activity be less likely to walk their pet. Also, it is even more likely that someone who does not practice good nutrition will unwittingly over-feed their cat or
dog. For these several reasons, there should be a program that will combat animal obesity as well as the well-being of the pet owner.

Obesity: Not Just a Problem for Humans
By Jessica Geduldig
E-mailed to: The Princeton Packet.

While it is well known that obesity is a major problem for Americans, little attention is paid to the problem of obesity among our pets. The CDC reports that over one-third of Americans are considered to be obese and our pets are not far behind with the AVMA reporting that approximately one-quarter of dogs in this country being obese. There are several causes of obesity in pets, but similarly to humans, a majority of the cases are a result of decreased physical activity and increased energy consumption. The sedentary lifestyle that many Americans have adopted is now being passed on to our pets. Often times the problem of obesity in pets may be ignored because it lacks the stigmatism that is associated with obesity in humans. A lot of people look at an overweight or obese pet as being cute, but in reality obesity is a real health concern. Obesity can have devastating effects on an animal’s health such as increased risk for several diseases and chronic conditions including diabetes, hyperadrenocorticism, hypothyroidism, pancreatitis, certain cancers, and arthritis. In the end this results in a shortened lifespan for our pets and increased veterinary bills for us. It is the responsibility of the pet owner to keep their pet in good health. Letting a pet’s weight get to the point where it is causing chronic problems is abusive to the animal. So while now we have this problem with obesity among people and pets, it provides an opportunity for pet owners and their pets to work together to increase physical activity and eat better to achieve a healthier life style. It is time to treat our pets with attention and activity, not with food. Not only will this benefit both pet and pet owner, but can also strengthen the bond between pet and owner. Now dog can be mans best friend and also mans best weight loss buddy.