PET DIET DRAMA! HOW TO TALK ABOUT PET FOOD WITH CLIENTS

Ernie Ward, DVM, CVFT
E3 Management, LLC
Ocean Isle Beach, North Carolina
USA

Over half the dogs and cats in the United States are now classified as overweight by their veterinarian. Recent surveys suggest that most veterinarians aren’t discussing the serious health threat of obesity and that pet owners are desperate for help. If veterinarians continue ignoring nutritional education, not only will our patients suffer, but also our practices will pay a price in decreased visits and revenue. The veterinary profession must address these issues and develop strategies to promote healthier lifestyles, encourage nutritional counseling by veterinarians, and break the silence on the obesity conversation.

According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention’s (APOP) 2017 National Pet Obesity Awareness Day Survey conducted on nearly 2,400 dogs and cats by US veterinarians, 56% of adult dogs and 60% of adult cats were classified as overweight or obese. Obesity by itself is classified as a disease, but the health conditions associated with obesity reveal the heart of the epidemic’s impact on pets and their owners. Osteoarthritis, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, joint injury, various forms of cancer and decreased life expectancy are all linked to obesity in pets. “The body of evidence indicating that obesity causes costly and painful conditions is clear,” per Dr. Joe Bartges, a veterinary nutritionist and internist who serves on the APOP board and as Small Animal Clinical Sciences department head at University of Tennessee Knoxville’s College of Veterinary Medicine. “Without the obesity risk factor in place, the likelihood of pets getting many serious diseases is inarguably reduced.”

What do veterinarians think about pet obesity and their role in treatment and prevention? In November 2013, APOP and Trone Brand Energy, a North Carolina-based marketing firm focused on animal healthcare needs, interviewed 548 veterinarians to find out (95% confidence with a margin of error of +/- 4.17%). In general terms, veterinarians felt they were the most trustworthy source for animal nutritional information, yet felt they needed more education.

Veterinarians overwhelmingly (93%) agreed that obesity is a “big deal.” Paradoxically, 36% of veterinarians admitted they don’t discuss a pet’s weight with a client unless the pet is overweight. Veterinarians also estimated the number of dogs and cats that were overweight at 50% each.

93% of veterinarians reported they would like to see more involvement from pet food manufacturers in educating pet owners about the risks associated with pet obesity. While veterinarians generally didn’t credit manufacturers with adequately educating pet owners about pet obesity, not all veterinarians thought food choice was linked to pet obesity.

Veterinarians weren’t confident that clients would follow through on exercise or dietary programs with their pets. This could be due in part to the lack of programs in place to help owners comply and hold them accountable—something APOP hopes to affect through upcoming industry partnerships and programs.

Many veterinarians admitted to being under-equipped to fight pet obesity and would welcome a host of tools that are proposed to be part of the APOP coalition and upcoming efforts.

Pet owners and veterinary professionals were questioned about pet obesity, diet and nutrition, and sources of pet food advice. 58% of pet owners and 54% of veterinary professionals reported they had tried to help their own pet lose weight. Low-calorie and weight loss diets combined with increased exercise were the most cited weight loss strategies.
When asked what was the “biggest challenge to exercising your dog,” “Too busy” was the most common response, topping 25% of all pet owners and 43% of veterinary professionals. Behavior issues (21% pet owners and 19% veterinary professionals), inadequate access to exercise areas, and physical limitations of owner and pet completed the top four reported challenges.

The “fat gap” is rampant. 82% of pet owners indicated their pets were at a healthy weight, compared to veterinary estimates that 50% of pets are obese. Simultaneously, nearly half (42%) admitted they didn’t know what a “healthy weight” was for their pet.

Pet owners most strongly associated a decreased lifespan with pet obesity. Longevity should be highly considered as a key “reason to believe” for consumer-facing communications. Nearly three-quarters, 72%, of surveyed pet owners indicated that decreased life expectancy was linked to pet obesity.

48% of pet owners stated that their veterinarian failed to recommend a maintenance or routine diet for their pet and 15% commented that they “had to ask” to receive a pet food recommendation. 50% of surveyed veterinary professionals replied they offered maintenance pet food recommendations. When asked if they believed “commercial pet food is better or worse than ten years ago” (the melamine pet food recall was in 2007), 63% of pet owners and 76% of veterinary professionals reported pet food in 2017 was “better.”

“People food” for pets was generally considered “unhealthy,” with 65% of pet owners and 67% of veterinary professionals agreeing.

Organic pet food was perceived as “healthier” by 39% of pet owners, down from 43% in 2016, while 40% reported “I don’t know.” 26% of veterinary professionals categorized organic pet foods as “healthier,” up from 15% in 2016. 17% of veterinary professionals stated “I don’t know” when it comes to organic pet foods being “healthier” for pets.

Raw diets continue to divide these two groups, although support of raw diets among pet owners appears to be diminishing and confusion increasing, at least according to this survey.

- **Do you think raw diets are healthier for dogs and cats?**
  - “Yes” – 28% of pet owners (35% in 2016) and 13% of veterinary professionals (15% in 2016)
  - “No” – 28% of pet owners (30% in 2016) and 72% of veterinary professionals (71% in 2016)
  - “I don’t know” – 45% of pet owners (35% in 2016) and 15% of veterinary professionals (14% in 2016)

Pet owners also reported confusion and disagreed with veterinary professionals about low- and no-grain diets and corn.

- **Are low- or no-grain diets healthier for dogs?**
  - “Yes” – 46% of pet owners and 21% of veterinary professionals
  - “No” – 12% of pet owners and 63% of veterinary professionals
  - “I don’t know” – 43% of pet owners and 16% of veterinary professionals

- **Do you think corn is healthy for dogs?**
  - “Yes” – 5% of pet owners and 50% of veterinary professionals
  - “No” – 63% of pet owners and 30% of veterinary professionals
  - “I don’t know” – 31% of pet owners and 20% of veterinary professionals

- **Do you think corn is healthy for cats?**
  - “Yes” – 3% of pet owners and 34% of veterinary professionals
  - “No” – 63% of pet owners and 46% of veterinary professionals
  - “I don’t know” – 34% of pet owners and 20% of veterinary professionals

Nutritional and dietary solutions were the most appealing course of action for pet owners with an obese pet. The weight management programs will need to be packaged well and involve a veterinary team effort to gain consumer uptake. The barrier to switch to a premium-priced diet is perhaps lower than most manufacturers and veterinarians predict, with 62% indicating they would pay a $10 monthly premium if it
would help their pet lose weight. 61% of pet owners stated they would commit to an exercise regimen for their pet that required 2 to 3 hours each week for two months if their veterinarian recommended it.

As demonstrated in our survey, pet owners believe nutritional care and pet food are of primary importance in enabling best care.

TALKING ABOUT OBESITY WITH PET OWNERS

The first step toward improving the lives and well-being of the pets we’re entrusted to care for and to end this epidemic is to start talking about it. We know that being overweight and obese is bad for pets; why aren’t we talking about it more often?

In a 2004 study published in *Obesity Research*, 52.6% of obese patients that did not undergo bariatric surgery reported that their primary care physician “never” or only “once in a while” discussed their morbid obesity with them. In other words, unless the obese patient was going to have surgery, their doctor rarely mentioned their weight. One of the key reasons why physicians fail to counsel their patients about obesity may lie in their perceived distrust in the success of available treatments. They see lots of weight loss options and lots of overweight people; the math simply doesn’t add up. When confronted with the decision to discuss something you don’t really believe works, you’re unlikely to discuss it.

It’s no different in veterinary medicine. We see lots of overweight and obese pets and lots of diet foods and diet treatments and yet the number of fat pets keeps growing. Subsequently we stop talking about it. Nobody likes to bet on a losing horse – especially one that we believe loses with patient after patient, day after day.

Our clients depend on us for recommendations to improve the quality of life as well as life expectancy of their pets. However, due to busy schedules and lack of training in weight-related disorders, nutrition and weight loss, it is often difficult for veterinarians to communicate this information and promote change. For our profession to truly help our patients, we must take the time to learn about these issues and make the time to talk about them with our clients.

If we’re going to talk about pet obesity, we must believe it’s important – really important. Veterinarians who understand that achieving and maintaining ideal weight will improve their patient’s quality of life and life expectancy are more enthusiastic about the topic. We must study the association between obesity and conditions such as type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis, hypertension, heart disease, cancer and more. We must become familiar with the impact that a pet’s weight-associated morbidity has on the pet-family bond and how this can negatively influence the level of care a pet receives as they age. We must search for simple lifestyle changes that can make huge improvements in a pet’s well-being. We must feel comfortable looking a client in the eye and confidently discussing strategies for losing weight in a non-threatening manner. Once you believe in something, others sense that passion and are more inclined to listen and believe in you.

Another potential source of bias against counseling clients about their pet’s weight issue is the doctor’s perception that the client doesn’t care or want to hear about it. If a doctor enters the room and thinks that the client isn’t motivated to change their pet’s weight, they’re probably not going to start talking about obesity. Unfortunately, we’re often wrong. In the same manner that we pre-judge clients and their willingness to pay for medical care, we often incorrectly assume that clients don’t want to learn about pet weight loss or nutrition. This issue becomes even more challenging if we don’t truly believe in the benefits of weight loss and the value of spending our precious time discussing it. If we assume that everyone will be willing to pay for our services and is interested in improving their pet’s quality of life, regardless of the challenges, we will better serve them.

Because of the social stigma associated with being overweight and obese, many doctors simply find it more comfortable to avoid the topic altogether. Further, a few high-profile media cases involving patients suing physicians for offending them while discussing their weight has heightened fears and decreased the number of doctors being proactive about weight issues. The American Medical Association (AMA) commented on this dilemma in November 2003: “(I)f your patient’s weight is a health issue, you should not hesitate to approach the topic.”

Proceedings of the Southern European Veterinary Conference & Congreso Nacional AVEPA, 2018 - Madrid, Spain
Regardless of the client’s weight, our responsibility is to the pet. With this in mind, we must feel comfortable separating our client’s obesity from the discussion of their pet. Normally the client is aware that their pet is overweight or obese yet may not fully understand its impact on their pet’s health. Instead of stating the obvious, “Did you know Fluffy is obese?” try saying, “I’m concerned about Fluffy’s weight because I’m worried it may be causing health problems for her. Do you think her weight is causing health problems?” This is especially important when the patient has weight-associated conditions such as osteoarthritis, type 2 diabetes, or hypertension.

If you receive a noncommittal or disinterested response, don’t start detailing how diet and exercise can help Fluffy achieve an ideal weight. Instead, focus on the long-term health risks associated with Fluffy’s excess weight. “I know how much you care about Fluffy and that’s why I want to help you avoid some serious disease such as diabetes, heart disease and arthritis.” Center the conversation on the prevention of debilitating and often costly diseases as opposed to the latest diet fad or tool.

SHOW SUPPORT
It is vital you demonstrate unconditional support and acceptance when confronting obesity. Admit that weight loss is a challenge for everyone, including veterinarians, and that you understand the difficulties first hand. Share your own struggles and you’ll gain the trust of your clients.

Clients will also respond more favorably to your recommendations if they feel understood. A 2001 *Annals of Internal Medicine* published article demonstrated that by communicating empathically doctors had higher diagnostic accuracy, patients adhered to the recommended therapies more frequently and patient and physician satisfaction was higher in a shorter amount of time. The hallmarks of empathic communication include active listening skills such as using nonverbal cues such as maintain good eye contact, nodding in agreement and leaning toward the client to convey interest in what they are saying; framing the client’s statements to demonstrate that you understand what they are saying (“Let me see if I have this right: Fluffy began gaining weight after a new neighbor moved in next door.”); reflecting the emotional tone of the client’s statements to show you understand how they feel (“Yes, I know how frustrating this can be.”); involving the client as partners in the care of their pet (“Is there anything I left out?” or “Does that sound right to you?”).

Partnership with our clients is a vital component of any successful medical recommendation. It is critical that we match our treatment plan with our client’s preferences, abilities and readiness for change. This is contrast to the traditional directive approach in which we simply tell the client what they need to do because we say they need to do it. Today’s client no longer accepts everything a veterinarian says as valid without challenge. This isn’t a threat or creation of an adversarial relationship but rather a cry for involvement. We should encourage our clients to discuss their lifestyle patterns (what, how much, when and where do they feed their pet or exercise them?), why they think it’s important for their pet to lose weight, what signs of improvement in what time frame do they expect and what challenges do they foresee (multiple cats on various diets). By actively partnering with clients, we allow them to help us tailor a treatment plan that is more likely to succeed as opposed to dictating the terms for change.

In addition to accepting a weight loss or other health plan, we must also be certain our clients understand it. Don’t rely on the old standard “Do you understand?” Everyone nods blankly in agreement because the last thing they want to do is to be lectured – again. Try using the “teach-back method.” After you explain how much and how frequently you want the client to feed their pet, ask “Would you mind explaining to me that feeding plan, so I can make sure I didn’t leave out anything?” This technique works well for medications, follow-up care or any actions that your clients need to complete on their own.

Winning the war against pet obesity will not be easy. There is no “magic cure” or “silver bullet.” Even with today’s amazing technological advances, the foundation for long-term success depends on changing veterinarians’ and pet owners’ attitudes toward pet weight issues and adopting a healthier lifestyle for their pets. The fantastic opportunity we have as veterinarians is that we may, by extension, positively impact the health and well-being of our human clients. It is time to make a stand and stop ignoring one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in our pet patients and their owners. Educate yourself,
develop a communication strategy and uphold the oath we took when we entered our profession with each and every patient.

REFERENCES


