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What's In a Few Extra Pounds?

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This month, we focus on a serious medical condition affecting dogs and cats nationwide: excess weight. Many of us have received a lecture from a physician or veterinarian about weight at some point, and pet owners may feel judged or blamed for their pets' weight problems. Before bristling when told that your pet is overweight, remember that this is a medical diagnosis—a disease, just like diabetes or heart disease. Pets gain weight for many reasons, and there is much you can do to help.

Several factors can contribute to excess weight in pets. Simply put, people and pets gain weight when they consume more calories than they need. Appetite, genetics, health conditions, medications, pain, mobility, food calories, portion sizes, activity levels, and household routines can all play a role. An underlying medical condition may also contribute. Arthritis, for example, can make exercise painful, while hypothyroidism—a common condition in dogs—can make weight loss extremely difficult without thyroid supplementation.

How can you tell whether your pet is overweight? Sometimes the answer is obvious, but long fur can make excess weight difficult to see. Viewed from above, your pet should have a visible waist. You should be able to feel—but not see—the ribs. If your pet is overweight, you are not alone: about 6 in 10 dogs and cats evaluated at U.S. veterinary clinics fall within the overweight or obesity range.

Excess body fat matters because it raises a pet's risk of more serious conditions, including arthritis, heart disease, asthma, constipation, and diabetes. Extra weight also strains the joints, making activities such as climbing stairs or jumping onto furniture or a bed more painful. Studies show that pets are likely to live longer when they remain outside the overweight or obesity range—and we all want our beloved companions with us for as long as possible.

If you or your veterinarian determines that your pet is overweight, the veterinarian should perform a physical examination and help rule out medical causes. At home, the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention website (petobesityprevention.org) is an excellent resource. Pet owners can learn about body condition scores and pet foods, follow step-by-step weight-loss guides, review breed weight ranges, and calculate appropriate amounts of food and treats.

Recognizing excess weight and beginning a weight-loss plan now can help your pet feel better and live longer. Ask every family member to support the effort. We all want our furry friends to be healthy, pain-free, and with us for many years.