



DOCTOR, HOW MUCH SHOULD MY PET EAT (Basic Pet Nutrition & Safe Dieting)

Is My Pet Too Fat (or Too Thin)?

Studies have shown that approximately one fourth of our cats and dogs are overweight according to the National Research Council, an arm of the National Academies (they publish the *Nutrient Requirements of Dogs and Cats*). A dog is considered obese if you can't feel its ribs or discern its waist from above. In cats, fat deposits on the back, face and limbs, or a round abdomen are signs of obesity. Most breeds of dogs and cats have an "ideal" weight that is listed in various sources like that of the American Kennel Club.

If a pet is too thin, the hip bones are readily felt, as are the ribs, and the abdomen has minimal contents (just enough to hold the organs). The eyes may be sunken in their sockets and the vertebrae easily felt. Generally, if a pet is offered a high quality diet, and it is too thin, there is probably something wrong with it. An overweight dog may have hypothyroidism, while overweight cats may have diabetes. An examination and possibly laboratory tests may be indicated.

Why is Its Weight So Important?

Because it will live longer and be healthier and happier if it is at its ideal weight! Many disease conditions in pets are associated with obesity: Heart disease, liver disease, diabetes, arthritis, heat stroke, and cancer, to name a few. The heavy pet has a shorter lifespan than the pet at its ideal weight.

What Should a Dog or Cat Eat?

Cats are carnivores, and their digestive system is designed for absorbing nutrients from animal-based proteins and fats. A cat should not be fed a vegetarian diet because it could result in harmful deficiencies of certain amino acids, fatty acids, usable proteins, and vitamins. While dogs prefer animal-based food, they can survive on vegetarian diets as long as they receive sufficient protein and other nutrients.

Cats like to snack while dogs are gorgers. Given free access to food, cats will eat 12 to 20 small meals, spread out through the day and night. While dogs will eat seven or eight times, mostly in the daytime. Some pets will regulate themselves on the amount of food to eat, but others are overeaters. So, "free choice feeding" will only work on pets that self-regulate and don't overeat.

Which brand is best?

Generally the pet food market is very competitive, so you will usually get your money's worth on the premium brands. However, larger companies tend to produce a product that is consistent from batch to batch, while small companies may vary in quality between batches.

How Much Should My Pet Eat?

Each dog or cat will be slightly different in its caloric requirements, depending on its natural basal metabolism, the environmental temperature, and its activity level. So, bottom line, we can make some assumptions and compute an amount your pet should need, but take these figures with a grain of salt. Every pet has different needs.

If you feed your pet as we advise and it is losing or gaining weight too rapidly, or not rapidly enough, then you need to make some common-sense adjustments. Weight loss is not a quick process. It may take a year or more to safely get your overweight pet to its ideal weight. A safe program does not just consist of dieting. It is a combination of increased activity (increased caloric combustion) *and* decreased food ingestion (decreased caloric consumption). We would like to convert some of that excess fat to muscle mass. Muscles are heavier than fat, so with exercise some pets will weigh more at first though they are slimming down! For the obese pet, exercise may initially consist of walks on cool mornings or swimming in the family pool. Cats can be encouraged the chase toys.

One of the most common "diets" is to eat the same stuff, but eat less of it. Typically, we will start with feeding 1/4 to 1/3 less each day. Also, quit feeding a mixture of canned food or other goodies "because it won't eat otherwise." Let your pet be bored by its food. It doesn't have to eat every day. Studies have shown that a dog or cat can eat every third day and remain healthy. If it doesn't feel inspired to eat every meal, we are winning the battle of fat with "tough love."

What if I or My Pet Cannot Exercise Frequently?

If your pet has a severe weight problem and especially if it cannot exercise for some reason, we can mathematically derive a diet program for it.