

# Setting up an obesity clinic

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The weight-management process usually consists of the following stages: initial assessment, weight-loss phase, stabilisation phase and long-term maintenance phase. During the initial phase, a health screen is performed and initial measurements (weight, body condition score and measurements) are taken. Advice is then given to the owner about the weight-loss plan (e.g. type of food and amount to feed (or drug dose), activity recommendations). The weight-loss phase then commences, which can last a variable amount of time (typically six-18 months), during which time the animal returns for regular weight checks and plan adjustments. Once target weight is reached, the plan is gradually adjusted (typically by steadily increasing food intake) until weight stabilises. The dog or cat is then monitored periodically to ensure that there is no weight regain. The weight-management process is long and labour intensive. A weight clinic is an excellent way of ensuring success.

## WHY SET UP A CLINIC?

Very few people dispute current facts that obesity is now one of the most common medical diseases of our time; most estimates suggest that between one-third and half of all dogs and cats are overweight. Obesity is also a growing concern in other companion animal species, most notably rabbits. As mentioned above, weight management is a difficult and, undoubtedly, establishing a weight clinic has the potential to benefit a considerable number of patients on a practice's database. Besides the obvious health benefits, other advantages include financial benefits (e.g. sale of pet food, puzzle feeders and other products), the potential to produce a strong bond between clients and the practice and the fact that involvement in weight clinics can be extremely rewarding for practice members.

## WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

Weight clinics require teamwork, and usually run most successfully when the whole practice team is on board. Everyone should be familiar with how and when the clinics run, and should 'sell' the clinic to prospective clients whenever possible. Training sessions may be needed to get everyone up to speed. Receptionists are on the front line with arrivals to the clinic, and can encourage the use of waiting room weigh scales (and record on the animal's records). They also assist by making appointments, handing out clinic leaflets and selling diet food. Veterinary surgeons should be prepared to raise the issue of excess body weight during consultations, most notably



during the annual health check. A body condition score can be performed to illustrate the problem. If suitable cases are identified, they can encourage clients to attend the weight clinic. In practice, nurses rarely need encouragement to get involved in weight clinics. Their enthusiasm can be tapped to ensure that cases do not get missed, i.e. by reminding the veterinary surgeon to discuss weight issues with clients. Usually, however, one or two nurses have primary responsibility for running the clinic, and will have been suitably trained for the purpose.

Having a policy of regular weighing (e.g. at every visit using scales positioned in the waiting room) can help to identify dogs and cats where weight is not stable. Furthermore, all staff should be familiar with how to perform a body condition score and what the categories mean.

## HURDLES TO ESTABLISHING A WEIGHT CLINIC

The cost of establishing a weight clinic is not great, so there are very few financial concerns. Of more significance, is the fact that the idea of an obesity clinic may be greeted either by apathy or by overt resistance from staff members, most notably veterinary surgeons. Some may question the significance of obesity as a medical concern or may lay the blame for obesity in a pet dog squarely in the lap of the owner, and rather simplistically assume that successful weight loss is just a case of getting their pet 'to eat less and exercise more'. In practice, whatever the reasons for development of obesity, the path of successful weight loss can be extremely challenging and requires close support.

Weight loss is rarely, if ever, successful when owners are left to their own devices. Since weight clinics are most successful when supported by the whole of the practice team, concerns of team members need to be discussed and addressed as far as possible before starting. The plans for a clinic should be discussed in detail with the whole team and people's concerns heard. It may be worth considering arranging a seminar for the practice to raise awareness for obesity and emphasise the benefits to the practice, and get the whole team on board.

### THE WEIGHT CLINIC TOOL KIT

Various items are required to establish a weight clinic from scratch. The most important item, though, is a committed veterinary nurse who has the drive to set up and then run the clinic. Usually, there is a budding weight clinic nurse in every practice! If necessary, training courses are available. In this first instance, consider contacting your pet food supplier. In addition to a dedicated veterinary nurse, it is often sensible to have a veterinary surgeon that can assist with managing the clinic. They can be available to oversee weight programmes, assess any medical concerns as they arise and, if drug therapy is being considered for weight loss, can prescribe the medication.

With regard to infrastructure, clinics need minimal equipment, and can be run from a single consulting room. It is sensible to make time available during the day for clinic appointments, perhaps at times when the consulting room is not required for other purposes (i.e. late morning, lunch times, mid-afternoon etc.). Initially, time may only need to be made available once a week but, as the clinic grows, more consulting room time may need to be made available. Finally, there should be a dedicated set of electronic weigh scales, which are regularly calibrated for accuracy and precision (i.e. using a bag of food). In addition, it may be worth investing in kitchen scales, so that an example food portion can be weighed out for the owner (to compare with their scales at home). When starting out, it may be easiest to contact your food supplier for weight-clinic-related materials, to assist you in running the clinics (e.g. posters, charts, food diaries, information leaflets). However, practice-specific materials can be generated when the clinic is fully established. Food companies also usually have their own computer software that can be used to assist with weight management (calculating starting food intake, monitoring progress, generating charts etc.). Other items that can assist in running the clinic include a calculator, a tape measure, examples of puzzle feeders and food bowls, prescription food samples and a digital camera. Periodic photographs, taken in a standard manner, are an excellent means of demonstrating success to owners and, with permission, can then be used to publicise the clinic to prospective owners.

### PUBLICITY

Once established, there are various ways of publicising the clinic. An integrated approach is usually best, since a range of strategies is likely to appeal best to the range of clients visiting the clinic. Posters can be hung in the waiting room and reception area, the consulting room used for the clinic

can also be kitted out, by using posters, charts, information boards and photographs of successful cases. Furthermore, the clinic services can be advertised on websites, vaccine reminders and through the telephone system (e.g. information for clients placed on hold). Organising seminars for clients may also be fruitful; some can be aimed at prospective clients, while others may be more suitable for enrolled clients (i.e. 'weight watchers' style support groups). Finally, it is worth spending time deciding upon an appropriate name. While various options could be considered, the term 'obesity clinic' should be avoided given its negative connotations. Since the clinic's aim to treat obesity rather than create it, terms such as weigh-in club, healthy weight clinic, slimming club, fitness club etc., are preferred.

### CLINIC CHARGES

Most UK veterinary clinics do not charge for weight clinic services, except for the food sold. This model is likely to remain popular but other options are available. Given that competition for prescription food sales is now highly competitive, many practices are considering other approaches. For example, owners could sign up and pay a one-off fee, which includes all weight clinic appointments and food. This has the advantage of giving incentive to the client to return to your practice, thereby increasing compliance.



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