

# The role of nutrition in managing obesity



With research showing that more than two thirds of dogs and more than a third of cats are overweight, Caroline Burke BSc RVN, outlines the important role of nutrition in managing these companion animals' weight

Latest research shows that 65% of dogs and 39% of cats are overweight and obese<sup>1,2</sup> meaning that vets and nurses are more likely to see a patient with a body condition score (BCS) of six or above (on a nine-point scale) than one at ideal weight and shape (BCS four to five). In response to the growing numbers of overweight and obese patients, the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) released their position statement, recognising obesity as a disease in cats and dogs, encouraging both veterinary surgeons and owners to be 'proactive in addressing obesity and its consequences, in order to improve the health and welfare of pets.'<sup>3</sup>

## CONSEQUENCES OF OBESITY

The links between obesity and increased incidence of other conditions such as joint disease, diabetes mellitus, urinary disease, skin disease and tumours are well documented.<sup>4</sup> Such conditions can lead to additional costs for the pet owner. Overweight cats and dogs may have a reduced life expectancy, with studies indicating that it may be as much as 2.5 years less in overweight dogs,<sup>5</sup> and just under two years in cats<sup>6</sup> (Figures 1 and 2). By encouraging these owners and their pets to undertake a weight-management programme we can help them live longer, healthier lives.

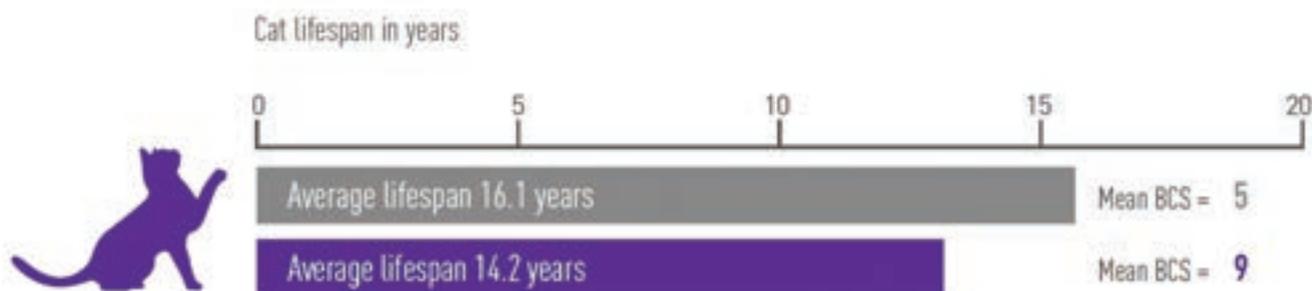


Figure 1.

Figure 2.

**OWNER EDUCATION**

Studies highlight that pet owners are more likely to underestimate the BCS of an overweight pet.<sup>7</sup> The first step in the patient's weight-management programme is, therefore, to help the client recognise their pet is overweight. For veterinary professionals, BCS is not only a basis for diagnosis and calculating the cat or dog's ideal weight but crucially provides a method of guiding and communicating to the pet owner to understand the impact of this disease on their pet. The now well-established nine-point BCS model has been further adapted by Royal Canin to include six dog and one cat morphology, to make communication about obesity even more specific to pet owners with different sized dogs. Once the client has recognised their pet is overweight or obese, they can be referred to a weight-management clinic, where they can receive additional support to help their pet reach their ideal weight and shape.

**DEVELOPING A WEIGHT-MANAGEMENT PLAN**

Obesity is often referred to as an imbalance of calorie intake and expenditure. Therefore, it is very common for people to recommend reducing calorie intake and increasing exercise as part of a weight management plan.

While the importance of exercise for cats and dogs should not be ignored, a 2019 study highlighted that exercise alone wasn't as effective as a specifically formulated weight management diet in promoting weight loss.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the focus for any weight-management plan should be reducing calorie intake.<sup>8</sup>

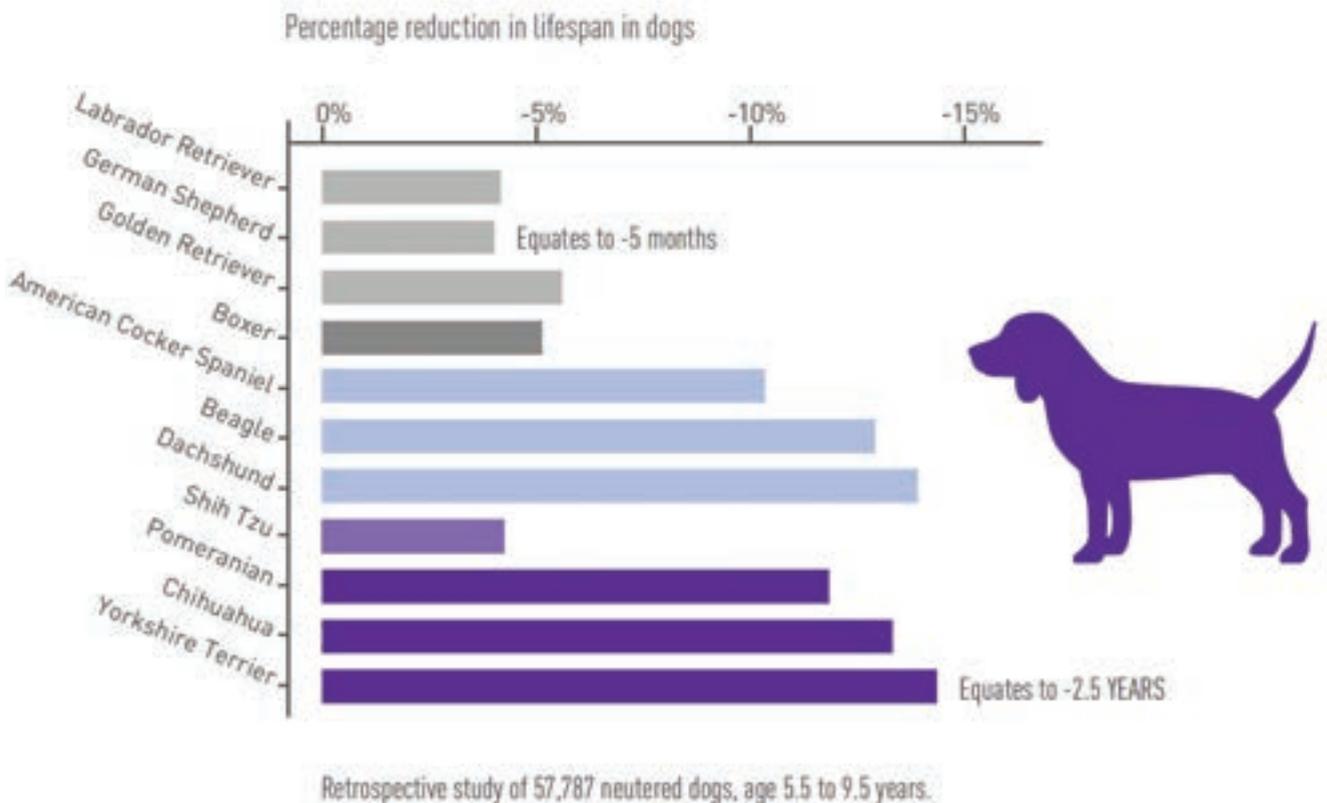
**REDUCING ENERGY INTAKE**

A detailed history of the pet's current diet and eating habits should be taken. Using a food diary or questionnaire (Figure 3, for example) can provide vets and nurses with valuable information and can be very helpful for owners to document their pets' food history and begin to understand the impact of extra calories.

Given the nature of obesity and how drastically calories need to be cut to induce weight loss, it is no wonder that a major concern for owners whose pets are undertaking a weight-management programme is that they will be hungry and the impact this will have on the perception of begging behaviour.<sup>9</sup> Evidence in human studies show that some foods are more effective than others in reducing hunger, and foods high in protein, fibre, carbohydrates or water are the most satiating. Results from a trial performed by Weber et al (2007) indicated that a diet containing high protein and high fibre had a greater satiating effect than either protein or fibre alone.<sup>10</sup> To this end, feeding a specifically formulated weight-management diet is recommended.

**LONG-TERM MANAGEMENT**

Weight re-gain after a successful weight-loss programme is common in cats and dogs. In fact, the results of a 2012 study suggest that nearly 50% of dogs who successfully complete a weight loss programme will re-gain weight.<sup>11</sup> This is because the energy requirements needed to maintain an ideal



weight and shape post weight loss are lower than the energy requirement of cats and dogs who have never been obese.<sup>11,12</sup> It is therefore recommended that patients remain on their weight management diet long term in order to prevent weight re-gain.

**SUMMARY**

Obesity is a complex disease and one that presents clear health-and-welfare issues for cats and dogs. By having a strong practice protocol in place for weight management, and utilising a specifically formulated weight-management diet, practices can help owners make long-term changes that benefit their pet.

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## DOG QUESTIONNAIRE

The main aim of this questionnaire is to gather as much preliminary information about your dog and its lifestyle. We will use the questionnaire to form the basis of the weight management consultation. It will also allow us to design a specific weight plan for your pet.

Please consult all family members (where possible) and answer all questions as honestly as possible. If there are any questions you are unhappy to answer then please leave blank.





Dog's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Breed: \_\_\_\_\_

Owner's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Sex Status  
(e.g. male/neutered)

**DIET**

**1** What do you feed your dog at meal times?

Dry Food  Tinned food

Home prepared food  Raw Diet

Semi-Moist  Other (please list)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**4** What times do you feed your dog?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**6** How do you measure your dog's daily feeding amount?

Measuring cup

Weigh food

Fill bowl

Mug/cup

Other (please specify)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**2** What brand of food do you feed your dog?

\_\_\_\_\_

**5** Tick any of the following you currently feed your dog and list product name

Purchased treats

Table scraps/leftovers

Human food

Pet food used as treats/rewards

Chews (raw hide, dental)

Other

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**7** Notes

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**3** How many times do you feed your dog each day?

1  2  3  4  Left out all day

\_\_\_\_\_

Figure 3.