

Paunchy pets

Tackling animal obesity

By Chrystle Fiedler

WHEN BROOKLYN BURTON of Columbus, Ohio, entered her great-uncle's house in 2013 to help clean up his hoarder lifestyle, the last thing she expected to find was a dog that needed to be rescued. "I was shocked," says Burton. "I wasn't even sure what kind of dog he was supposed to be. He was such a blob, and he had a lot of trouble walking."

Dennis was, in fact, a miniature dachshund and, at 56 pounds, extremely obese—over 45 pounds overweight, due to a diet of fast food, pizza and frozen dinners. Unfortunately, he has plenty of company. The eighth annual National Pet Obesity Prevalence Survey, conducted this year by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, found that 58 percent of U.S. cats and 53 percent of dogs are overweight.

"Just like people, pets often aren't as active as they should be [in order to] burn off the calories that they are eating," says Dr. Susan Nelson, clinical associate professor at the Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine and a veterinarian in the Pet Health Center.

Part of the problem is that most owners don't realize their pets are overweight or even obese. "When you see your pet every day, it's really hard to see the weight that they are putting on," says Nelson. "People are often shocked when their pets weigh in at the vet."

Excess weight can lead to a variety of serious problems, from Type 2 diabetes (especially in cats) to osteoarthritis, high blood pressure, heart problems and various forms of cancer. Specific breeds—dachshunds, for example—are at high risk of developing back problems. "Excess weight puts more strain on the back, especially when running and jumping," says Burton's vet, Dr. Kathleen Ham of Ohio State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. "This can lead to ruptured disks."

Start with your vet

Before you start your pet on a weight-loss program, see your vet. "It's important that you work with your vet to get a program that is safe and that will work for you and your pet," says Dr. Andrea Fascetti, a professor of nutrition in the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California, Davis. "The plan needs to take into account the owner's relationship with the pet, what they like to do together and what's important to them." Your vet can also rule out underlying issues, such as hypothyroidism, that can contribute to weight gain.

Burton, a nursing student, consulted with her vet and then switched Dennis to one-third of a cup

of dry dog food twice daily, and he shed 10 pounds in just three weeks. "I did a lot of research to find out the best diet for a miniature dachshund and how much they should be eating for a healthy weight," says Burton.

After Dennis lost over 44 pounds he needed skin removal surgery. "He was stepping on his belly skin and had developed painful skin infections because the folds were trapping moisture," says Ham, who performed the operation. Afterward, Dennis had physical therapy and was put on an exercise program. "Losing weight is really a lifestyle change—diet and exercise—and [Burton] embraced all of it," Ham adds.

A new leash on life

Making positive changes may be difficult but it's worth it, especially since research shows that pets with a healthy weight live longer. A landmark 2002 study of paired Labrador retriever siblings, published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, showed that when one was fed normally and one was fed 25 percent less, the leaner dog lived up to two years longer. This type of diet isn't the norm for most dogs, but it points to the benefits of weight loss.

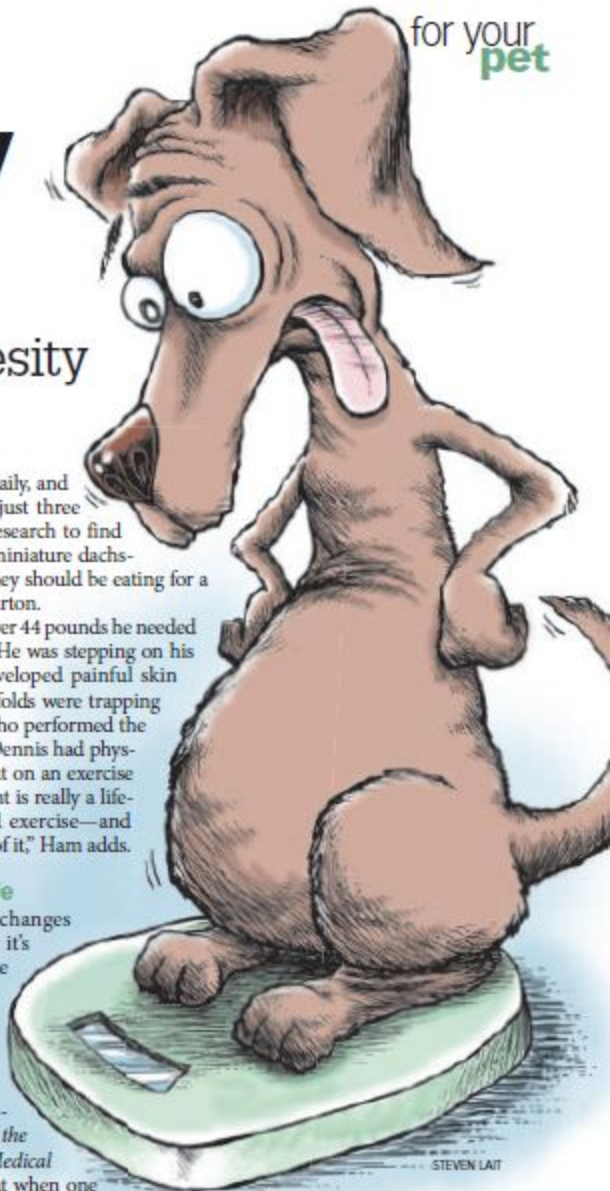
The slimmer Dennis, now 6, is a new dog. "When I first got him, he was very depressed and unhappy, because he didn't feel good," says Burton. "Now, he's into everything. He runs and likes to fetch the ball and plays tug-of-war, and he's just very happy."

Ham says of his transformation, "It's really just a remarkable journey. Dennis shows that it's never too late to make positive changes if it will improve your pet's quality of life." 🐾

Chrystle Fiedler specializes in writing about health.

The Costco Connection

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Quick tips

- Have your vet screen and evaluate your pet and create a weight-loss and exercise program that is safe and will be effective.
- Spaying and neutering can cause weight gain, so it's important to reevaluate your pet's nutritional needs afterwards.
- Be patient. Work with your vet to tweak the weight-loss plan over time.
- Don't wait to start. It's easier to maintain a pet's healthy weight than it is to lose pounds.
- Don't cut out treats. You can go low-calorie with baby carrots and air-popped popcorn and/or just factor regular treats into a weight-loss plan.

—Dr. Andrea Fascetti