



VETERINARY NUTRITIONISTS TRY TO CURB OBESITY IN CATS

■ Rob Warren, UC Davis VMTH Communications & Marketing Officer (with Sena Christian)

Obesity in pets is becoming a concerning issue for many owners and veterinarians. Almost 50 percent of pets are overweight or obese.

“It’s one of the easiest problems to diagnose and one of the hardest to treat,” said Dr. Andrea Fascetti, a professor of nutrition at UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

Over thousands of years, cats and dogs evolved to efficiently accumulate body fat to prepare for regular periods of famine; those with the largest fat stores had the greatest likelihood of surviving scarcity. But times have changed. Today, pets continually feast on high-calorie food and treats. Their human companions often feed them scraps from the dinner table. Pets lounge around much of the day, and don’t necessarily get plenty of exercise. They aren’t adapted to the modern era, so they gain more and more fat. Overweight pets are at increased risk for developing diseases such as diabetes and arthritis, and breathing problems.

Dr. Fascetti and other professors are researching several aspects of animal diets at the school’s Center for Companion Animal Health (CDAH). A healthy diet for pets supports longevity and can minimize and prevent many health problems, including obesity.

One study is examining the safety of resveratrol in cats and resveratrol content of pet foods. Resveratrol is most widely known as the antioxidant in red wine that changes metabolism and might be associated with weight loss. Resveratrol is already included in some dietary supplements for pets – none of which are regulated.

Another research project involves the use of probiotics in obese cats to determine if they result in animals changing their eating behavior. Studies in human medicine suggests probiotics produce changes in the gastrointestinal tract that affect appetite and food intake, and possibly alter hormones associated with obesity.



UC Davis veterinary nutritionists help clients develop pet-specific diets.

Additionally, the school is conducting a study looking at the effect of water content of food, and therefore calorie intake. Many veterinarians are recommending putting cats on canned food diets since canned foods contain up to 80 percent water – the theory being that cats will feel fuller and reduce food intake. The short-term study found that cats fed a canned food diet did indeed have a lower calorie intake and achieved weight loss. A longer-term study is currently ongoing.

Dr. Fascetti, chief of the Nutrition Support Service at the UC Davis veterinary hospital, along with fellow faculty member Dr. Jennifer Larsen, utilize these and other research results to provide the tools necessary for veterinarians and owners to work together to help ensure optimum health and longevity for pets. Through the service’s Healthy Weight & Nutrition Clinic, the board-certified nutritionists develop nutritional management plans specific to each pet’s needs. **P**

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