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## FIVE PRACTICAL STEPS TO WEIGHT LOSS FOR YOUR PETS

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Your veterinarian has recommended that your pet lose some weight. Your first question might be, "How do I know my pet weighs too much?" This can be a tricky question with so many varieties of breeds, it's hard to have an exact "goal weight" for every dog or cat.

Rather than a numerical weight, your veterinarian will likely use what's referred to as a Body Condition Score, or BCS, to decide where your pet falls on a weight spectrum. Most veterinarians use a scale from 1 to 9 (some use 1 to 5, so be sure to ask if it's not clear in your pet's paperwork). 5/9 is an ideal BCS, which means 3 things:

1. The pet's ribs are easily felt by running your hands over their ribcage with minimal pressure, but cannot be individually seen from a few feet away.
2. The pet has an "abdominal tuck", which means their chest is closer to the ground than their abdomen if you're looking at them from the side.
3. The pet has a "waist", which means if you're looking at their back from above, their ribcage is slightly wider than their abdomen.

There are even breed variations within these parameters of an "ideal" BCS, so if you're not sure what criteria your veterinarian is seeing, be sure to ask for clarification. A BCS of 1 would be a pet that is much too skinny, and a BCS of 9 would mean a pet that is much too overweight. The vast majority of pets fall somewhere in the 5-7 range, with 7 being a pet that likely has no waist, very little abdominal tuck, and whose ribs require a little digging to feel beneath a layer of fat tissue (despite how adorable those extra layers might make your little one).

If your pet is falling somewhere above the 5/9 mark, your veterinarian will likely recommend a weight loss plan for your pet. There are so many resources available to aid you in this journey that it can be a little overwhelming – here are a few practical tips to get started.

**Calories Count.** Did you know that most dry pet foods contain only about 300-400 calories per cup? And that's a kitchen measurement "cup", i.e. 16 tablespoons or ½ pint. The reason for this is because pets typically have a much lower daily calorie requirement than humans (ours is roughly 2,000 calories per day). Each pet's daily calorie requirement can be calculated using their ideal weight, which as I've mentioned earlier, can be a tough number to nail down. Here's the simplest version of the formula:

$$(\text{Ideal weight in pounds} \div 2.2 \times 30) + 70 = \text{Daily Calorie Requirement}$$

Keep in mind that this formula is the most basic way to start calculating daily calorie requirements; many other factors, such as age, sex, spay/neuter status, body condition score, exercise regimen, etc must be accounted for to know your pet's exact caloric intake needs. But for the sake of getting started on a weight loss plan, the baseline formula is a good way to have a rough idea for your pet.

For example, my own miniature dachshund, whose ideal body weight is approximately 10lbs:  $(10 \div 2.2 \times 30) + 70 = 206$  calories required per day. That's it! Just 206 calories per day will keep little Oscar at his ideal body weight. That means for most average dry pet foods, Oscar needs less than a cup per day to stay at his best weight. For further example, the pet food I use has 383kcal/cup – so if I divide Oscar's daily requirement by that number  $(206 \div 383)$ , I get 0.54 cups per day to keep Oscar at his ideal BCS.

You might have calculated your own pet's daily calorie requirement and realized you'd have to cut down quite a bit to get to that ideal "cups per day" number. Rather than make a huge change right off the bat that can lead to potential frustration or even health problems, the very first step you can take on your pet's weight loss journey is to simply reduce their daily calorie intake by 25%. So without doing any "daily maintenance" calculations, simply take 25% off the top of your pet's plate for the day. For example, if your pet is eating a cup a day (½ cup in the morning, ½ cup in the evening), simply cut it down to ¾ cup a day (¼ cup in the morning, ½ cup in the evening). After about a month, you should see a difference in your pet's BCS. We also encourage you to "weigh in" your pet every week or so as you go – this will help you and your veterinarian decide if this simple starting step is enough to get the results your pet needs.

Of course, always consult with your veterinarian before making any major dietary changes.

**Choose Healthy Treats.** While we're on the subject of a 25% calorie reduction, don't forget to factor in treats! If your fur baby is getting 2 milk bones, 3 bites of table food at lunch and dinner, and a snack from brother or sister's bowl every day...definitely need to add that into your calorie considerations. Try switching out the milk bones and table scraps for a healthy treat, such as carrots, cucumber, banana, snap peas – many fruits and veggies make a great low-calorie substitute snack. Just avoid foods like grapes, raisins, and onions, which are toxic to pets and can cause serious health issues. When it comes to one fur baby taking more than their share of food from housemates' bowls, consider

feeding everybody in separate areas and avoid free-feeding (leaving a full food bowl out all the time). This can be tricky for cats, since many owners choose to free feed their kitties – in this case, you might consider investing in a microchip feeder, which will only release food to the cat it's programmed to by scanning their microchip as they come over the bowl.

**Quality Time is a Treat.** Many pet parents believe that food equals love, and food is a universal language that dogs, cats, humans, and most other animals speak fluently. But think of it this way: your pet derives the majority of their joy from you, their owner. They associate the treat with you, and will most likely feel equally loved if you trade the treat for a quick game of fetch, or a good behind-the-ear-scratch. Playtime is an excellent substitute for treats; not only does it prevent excess calorie intake, but it also gives your pet some much-needed exercise!

And, of course, it gives you some great stress-relieving, bonding time with your fur baby. That is something that no treat will be able to replace, in their eyes or yours.

**Exercise Makes a Difference.** In the same way making small diet changes makes a big difference, small exercise changes can do the same. On average for humans, a one mile walk can burn around 100 calories, which may not seem like a whole lot to you – but 100 calories is almost 50% of my little Oscar's daily intake requirements! While the numbers aren't perfectly transferable to dogs and cats, the concept is the same – a small amount of exercise can burn a big portion of your pet's daily calorie requirement. The adage is the same in human dieting and pet dieting – burning more calories off than they're taking in with food equals weight loss.

Many owners have questions about how to help pets exercise – especially cats. Some cats are leash-trainable (I'm as amazed as you are), but other kitties are not so motivated to get out and about. For these "less motivated" pets (dogs or cats), consider using a treat-dispensing toy at mealtimes. Simply add your pet's breakfast or dinner kibble to the toy rather than to a traditional bowl, and they'll burn calories while they eat. Plus, this activity can draw out mealtimes and allow your pet to feel more full over the course of the day as the toy helps to slow down the eating process. This is also a great option for working pet parents; you can leave your fur baby with their meal in a treat dispensing toy as you're heading off to work, and they'll have their time occupied while you're gone. Just make sure to test out any new toy with supervision first to make sure your pet can't bite off loose parts or injure themselves.

There are lots of other resources online to provide ideas for how to incorporate exercise into your pet's daily routine. Here are some suggestions I've found:

- Laser light toy for cats or dogs
- Cat trees or climbing platforms
- Teach your dog to run alongside you as you cycle
- Fetch! Automatic ball launchers, Frisbees, and other fun toys or throwing assistants can liven up this classic game
- Tug-of-war
- Hiding (low calorie!) treats around the house so your pet has to wander & "hunt"

**Check-In Regularly.** It's important to track your pet's progress on their weight loss journey by monitoring their numerical weight and BCS. You can even measure waistlines with a measuring tape! The tracking step is crucial because if your pet is not achieving weight loss goals as intended, there may be something else going on that warrants a trip to your veterinarian. This will allow us to advise on the weight loss plan, and if there's a concern for an endocrine or other health problem that's holding your pet back from success, we can guide you on further diagnostics to help you and your pet get back on track together. Always consult with your veterinarian if you have any questions or concerns during your pet's weight loss journey; we'd be happy to help.

Understandably, it can be frustrating to be advised by a veterinarian to start a weight loss plan for your pet, especially if you have already been trying some of these techniques at home. Just remember that we recommend it because we want the absolute best for your pet, and weight loss can have so many wonderful health benefits – lowered risk of diabetes, reduced incidence of arthritis and joint problems as your pet ages, and longer lifespan overall. As always, if you have any questions regarding weight loss or any other aspect of a healthy lifestyle for your pet, pay a visit to your family veterinarian. We would love to answer your questions and help you get started! 