



American Animal Hospital

Caring for your pets as if they were our own.

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Shedding the Pounds

We all know (some of us from personal experience!) that it's easier to prevent weight gain than it is to get all those extra pounds off once you have them. The same is true for our pets. Obesity is a growing problem for companion animals and, along with this trend, we are seeing an increase in weight-related diseases such as diabetes and arthritis. If your pet is starting to look more like a beach ball than his previously svelte self, it is time to do something. Your veterinarian can help you to evaluate your pet's weight and determine how much she needs to lose; from there, an actual food dose can be calculated to help get the extra weight off.



The first step? **Meal Feeding!** If the bowl is always full and your pet has all day to eat, it is the equivalent of living at an all-you-can-eat buffet. While some pets may be able to eat only what they need to maintain, for pets prone to obesity (which is most of them), this is a recipe for disaster. The most common first sign of illness in animals is a decrease in appetite – by the time they stop eating altogether, they are often quite sick. This is made more apparent in multi-pet households where pets share the same bowl: how do you know how much each pet is eating? Feeding your pet an exact amount twice daily will help to prevent over-eating and give you a better indication of your pet's health. An important tool in the fight against obesity is a measuring cup dedicated to measuring out your pet's meals, and separate bowls for each pet. Ideally, separate the pets for mealtimes (by a door if necessary) until everything is eaten, making individualized meals more doable.

If meal-feeding is new to your household, start off by putting a measured amount in each pet's bowl for 20 – 30 minutes. Whatever is not eaten after that time should be picked up and offered again (or discarded if canned food) at the next scheduled meal time. Typically the first 3-4 days are the hardest on owners, who often feel as if they are starving their pets accustomed to grazing. Animals are smart and do catch on fairly quickly to the meal schedule, so stand firm – you are doing what is best for them long-term. Sometimes feeding smaller meals more often works better for the persistent beggars or poor eaters. Three or four little meals per day keeps your pet from getting too hungry before the next meal, reducing gorging (and subsequent vomiting). Canned food is another secret weapon; the extra water in canned food increases the sensation of fullness, while keeping calories low. This is especially important for cats, who often don't drink enough water normally, to help keep the kidneys functioning well.



The next step after calorie restriction is always exercise. With dogs that makes easy sense – more walks, ball-chasing, dog park, etc – but with cats? It’s true, cats don’t often like to go for walks, but you can find a number of ways to exercise your cat with a little creativity.

Treat Balls (ie: Buster Cube®): This method also works great for our canine patients. Hard plastic balls, with an internal reservoir for kibble, can be used for actual treats or for your pet’s entire meal. The toy dog-sized balls work great for cats as well (some cats even use the big dog size) so don’t worry about trying to find tiny cat sizes. The advantage of this method is that your pet has a new target for food begging and it’s not you! Once kitty figures out that the ball spits food when he bats at it, make it more challenging by sizing the kibble-holes appropriately with tape. This provides exercise, portion control, and mental stimulation of your cat’s hunting instincts all in one. Hill’s T/D is perfect for this method as it is both low in calories and a larger kibble size to better fit the ball.



Something tells me this isn't what they meant

Kitty Stairmaster: If you have stairs in your home, you have another ready means of exercising your cat. An extra flight or three of stairs daily can have a sizable impact on your pet’s waistline. Many people try putting a litter box in the basement to encourage more stairs, only to find that the cat is only using the main floor litter box, or is developing constipation issues as well because he doesn’t want to go downstairs as often. Food is often a much better motivator. If you feed your cat on the opposite side of the stairs from which she spends most of her time (down in the basement, for example), they will typically learn this as “the dinner spot.” This means that you can often trick your cat into a few extra flights of stairs by going towards the steps as if with dinner in hand – when your cat darts down the stairs toward supper, let him go and carry on with your day.

Red Bug & Feather-wands: Laser penlights are readily available in pet stores and discount stores, which project a small red dot (bug) for cats to chase. Likewise feather-wands and cat-dancers can entice pets into some impressive aerobic acrobatics. This is a fun way for children to get involved in the pet’s care, as well as a good way to bond with your cat. It doesn’t matter if your cat (or child) has a short attention span either – what matters is consistency. Even five minutes of laser or feather-wand play *every day* is the kitty equivalent of you or me going to the gym for a half hour; it all adds up!

Forage feeding: Cats in the wild spend much of their day hunting for prey. Going to the same bowl in the same spot every day is boring and encourages over-eating (just as humans will over-eat if bored). Give your cat a chance to exercise those hunting instincts by hiding numerous small bowls, each with



only a few kibble, all over the house. Examples of hiding spots include the top of the cat tree, behind the sofa, on top of the washer or dryer, or under the bed; be as creative as you can to challenge your cat and feel free to change locations regularly. This not only gets your cat moving and provides mental stimulation, but slows down the eating process to prevent gorging and vomiting. We all feel fuller and eat less if we eat slowly, so let’s use this to our advantage with our pets.

Scatter feeding: Another alternative to the boring one-dish idea, this can be used well for both canine and feline patients and is a lot of fun for kids. Simply measure out your pet's dry kibble portion and toss it into the living room (or other room with lots of furniture). Your pet now must hunt down all those kibble that bounced and skittered under the furniture. As with forage feeding, it slows down how fast your pet eats and provides mental stimulation. The biggest disadvantage of these two methods is the difficulty in controlling how much each pet gets in multi-pet households. Many owners are dismayed at the idea of bits of kibble all over their carpets, but you'd be surprised at how little is left over with a dieting pet!

Remember, you can always bring your pet into the clinic at no charge for weight checks – no appointment is necessary. The receptionist or veterinary assistant can help you weigh your pet and will record the weight in your pet's chart to track your progress. We can even put a reminder in the computer system to call you for a weight check so that it doesn't get forgotten with our busy lifestyles. If you are not seeing the results you'd like, feel free to talk with your veterinarian about specially designed, prescription-only, diet foods or medical conditions which may make weight loss difficult for your pet. We are here to help you have a long and healthy life with your furry friend!

