While we already know that keeping pets at a healthy weight can help them live longer, obesity is still one of the biggest preventable problems facing cats and dogs today. And UK pet parents, despite their best intentions, are often unwittingly complicit in the problem. It’s clear that pet parents face obstacles both in recognising obesity and tackling it. We want to continue to break down these barriers, helping them prevent their pets from becoming overweight from a young age, as well as recognising excessive weight gain when it happens.

To do this, we’ve harnessed up-to-date survey data and key insights from pet health professionals to propose some immediate solutions for both pet owners and veterinarians on tackling the issue of pet obesity. And we’ve also looked to the future, considering how the trends of tomorrow could influence the fight against pet obesity in the long-term.

It’s ironic that pet obesity is an expanding problem. A 2021 study by the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) found that 7% of dogs seen by vets in one year were recorded as overweight – that equates to one in fourteen. Their previous study from 2009-2013 indicated that just 6% were overweight, indicating that obesity is increasing as time goes on. And it’s likely this figure is significantly under-representative as the study relied on the pet being noted as overweight in their medical records.

Pet obesity is a major public health concern, and there are a number of reasons why it’s an expanding problem. For example, the current obesity epidemic is driven by the availability of high-quality, palatable pet foods, and the increasing humanisation of the pet sector, which fuels pet owners to think of their pets as their children. But there are also factors specific to the pet-care sector, such as the research and marketing strategies employed by pet food manufacturers.

These resources have not only helped us to see the scale of the problem, but also understand the disconnects that lie behind it. We can see that pet owners may:

a) Lack the knowledge to prevent weight gain
b) Be unable to recognise the issue or understand why weight gain can be detrimental to their pets
c) Struggle with the mental framework most successful for undergoing and achieving weight loss for their pet when appropriate

With a wealth of information out there, it’s clear that a lack of awareness can’t be entirely to blame. So what else is? The goal of the ManyPets 2023 Why Weight? Report was to find out.

We put out two surveys — one for pet parents and one for veterinary professionals:

a) To discover pet parents’ approach to their cats’ and dogs’ diet and exercise — and their understanding of how these factors affect their pets’ weight, health and happiness.

b) To better understand the experiences of veterinary teams on the front line of the pet obesity crisis and discover what further help they need.

Animals remaining chronically overweight have been shown to have a reduced life-expectancy compared to the breed-average, sometimes by up to two and a half years. The effects of diet restriction on life span and age-related changes in dogs. Kealy RD, Lawler DF, Ballam JM, et al. J Am Vet Med Assoc. 2002;220(9):1315–1320

The ManyPets 2023 Why Weight? Report was made possible through support from:

2,476
Pet parents

398
Veterinary professionals

It also aimed to provide insight into what education is available on the topic of preventative health care for pets.

The goal of the ManyPets 2023 Why Weight? Report was to discover:

a) Pet parents’ approach — one for pet owners, and one for veterinarians
b) The pet obesity problem, as it sees it, and what more pet owners and pet professionals need to know

The survey was conducted by YouGov among 2,476 pet owners and 398 veterinary professionals in the UK in November 2023. The survey was designed to draw on the experiences of both pet owners and veterinary professionals in their approach to pet obesity. It aimed to provide insight into what education is available on the topic of preventative health care for pets.
OBESITY CRISIS

For a dog that is overweight or obese needs an estimated 620 calories a day according to the daily recommended calories. For a dog that is overweight or obese, Treats are frequently given in addition to pets' daily meals, so even treats that are marketed or perceived as 'healthy' can add to the daily intake of their pet. It's relatively standard to seeing overweight Golden Retrievers, which has normalised to owners being bombarded with 'cuddly' images of overweight pets, and veterinary professionals are not always successfully estimating for pet owners.

Any food treat is the most popular way to exercise dogs (with 94% of owners partaking), but some owners might not be aware that their pets are over-conditioned animals not just in the media, but also see it in their same pet, by different individuals.

Although lack of exercise can play a part, daily caloric intake is usually the root cause. Pet owners still seem to struggle with knowing appropriate portion sizes to avoid weight gain, and how to accurately weigh this out. Scoops and measures can be helpful, but owners need to be aware that the number on the scale is appropriate for their pet.

Although some dogs may have their exercise needs met, there are often those falling below their personal target. To manage my pet's weight, I use a scoop/measure I weigh it versus 36% of dog owners who free feed, meaning they leave the food out after being told by a veterinary professional (vet nurse or vet). This provides the opportunity for these owners often do not realise that safe, short, low impact exercise is beneficial for them to advise that treats do not make up more than 10% of the pet's daily caloric needs.

Our research supports that owners aren't always recognising the warning signs of weight issues in their pets. It can be difficult for owners to know how much to reduce meal-size, and know it can be a special part of your bond with your pet, says Dr. Ronngren. "We just want owners to be aware of the calories that go into their pets' food and treat intake, and that it matters. It's also possible that veterinary professionals are not always successfully educating pet owners about the importance of portion control and weight management.

Put simply, pet owners still seem to struggle with knowing what the ideal weight range for their pet is. How did you learn that your pet's weight is within the normal range? The vast majority of pet parents, roughly nine out of ten, are giving food treats to their pets at some point during the day. Dog owners were slightly more likely with 71% of dog parents admitting to giving them throughout the day without counting. For owners that didn't give food treats, the biggest reason was to avoid weight gain, with 40% of owners overall giving this reason.

Walking is by far the most popular way to exercise dogs, with 94% of owners partaking, but some owners might not be aware that their pets are over-conditioned animals not just in the media, but also see it in their same pet, by different individuals. Although some dogs may have their exercise needs met, there are often those falling below their personal target. To manage my pet's weight, I use a scoop/measure I weigh it versus 36% of dog owners who free feed, meaning they leave the food out after being told by a veterinary professional (vet nurse or vet). This provides the opportunity for these owners often do not realise that safe, short, low impact exercise is beneficial for them to advise that treats do not make up more than 10% of the pet's daily caloric needs.

A vet nurse told me that dogs could be getting the wrong portion size over the course of a week, which means that if this chew is served daily, it can add 10% of the pet's daily caloric needs. Treats are frequently given in addition to pets' daily meals, so even treats that are marketed or perceived as 'healthy' can add to the daily intake of their pet. It's relatively standard to seeing overweight Golden Retrievers, which has normalised to owners being bombarded with 'cuddly' images of overweight pets, and veterinary professionals are not always successfully estimating for pet owners.

Pet parent perceptions versus vet reality

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We aimed to learn about:

1. Differences in perceptions of overweight pets
2. Medical complications associated with weight gain in pets
3. Issues of time and priority
4. Insufficient training for veterinary professionals
5. Barriers to raising the topic of pet obesity

Our research revealed six key issues:

1. Differences in perceptions of overweight pets
2. Medical complications associated with weight gain in pets
3. Issues of time and priority
4. Insufficient training for veterinary professionals
5. Barriers to raising the topic of pet obesity
6. Comparison of perceived and professional levels of support given to pet parents dealing with overweight pets

Our survey suggests that professionals almost unanimously agreed and reports that “[overweight pets] are more likely to develop health problems when compared to their healthy weight counterparts.” (Hannah Bennett, veterinary surgeon and owner of Chonky Chops) The professionals we surveyed believe that the education provided to veterinary professionals needs to be improved in order to help them understand the true impact of obesity also requires them to be sensitive to the broad range of factors and emotions that come along with this. However, this perception is only getting in the way of tackling obesity. Clearly, with the rates of obesity in pets rising, this is an area that needs urgent attention.

Barriers to raising the topic of pet obesity

When asked about pet obesity over nine-in-ten respondents reported that they address it in their specific practice. When asked why, 68% of respondents said the pet obesity is a major issue that each of them need to look after their pets.

“I have been frustrated by relaying the message that their pet is overweight,” said one veterinary professional. “Owners end up just saying they will work on it in order to end their visits.”

There were an array of responses relating to this, from “the vet has had their own experience with a pet who was overweight” to “the vet has had their own experience with a pet who was overweight” to “the vet has had their own experience with a pet who was overweight” to “the vet has had their own experience with a pet who was overweight.”

Further to this, in response to a question asking why pet owners were reluctant to bring their pets in for weight loss, 44% of respondents reported that “the vet has had their own experience with a pet who was overweight.”

Wealthy and privileged pet owners more likely to be encouraged to weight loss

More than half of respondents linked diabetes with being overweight. The next part of our research took place within the veterinary cancers field. One of the veterinary professionals involved in our research said that “the veterinary professionals are seeing in the pets they examine.”

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A chronic medical condition such as arthritis can begin a process that exacerbates, severely damaging the long-term health of our pets. As a result, the pet’s quality of life is reduced and the dog needs to lose weight. While extra body weight does increase the stress upon a joint, almost more importantly, extra fat cells release inflammation. These cytokines are a massive detriment to the joint and surrounding tissues, and if left untreated, can lead to joint damage and pain.

While obesity is the root cause of the issues, the secondary complications—such as diabetes, heart disease, and osteoarthritis—can cause significant pain and discomfort. For example, osteoarthritis is one of the biggest risks to all dogs as they age. While the cause of osteoarthritis is multifactorial, obesity is a significant contributor. A dog that needs to lose weight.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DOGS AND THEIR OWNERS

Pet owners are encouraged to weight loss

Veterinary professionals are seeing an increasing number of overweight dogs and cats, and this trend is expected to continue. On average, vets reported that 61% of the dogs and 53% of the cats they see are overweight.

In the United States, the percentage of dogs and cats that are overweight has been steadily increasing over the past few decades. According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, the obesity rate for dogs has increased from 26.6% in 2000 to 56.1% in 2017. Similarly, the obesity rate for cats has increased from 32.3% to 60.9% over the same period.

The rise in obesity is not limited to the United States. A study published in the journal *Obesity* found that the prevalence of obesity in dogs and cats has increased in Europe and Australia as well. The study concluded that the increase in obesity is likely due to a combination of factors, including increased food intake, decreased physical activity, and genetic susceptibility.

Despite the rising prevalence of obesity, there is still a lack of recognition of the issue among pet owners. A survey of veterinary professionals found that only 20% of vets feel that they don't currently have the tools necessary to effectively address the problem. While many owners may be aware of the risks associated with pet obesity, they may not be motivated to take action.

In response to this, veterinary professionals have called for increased education and support for pet owners. The survey results suggest that there is a need for more resources to be dedicated to addressing this issue. With an estimated 52 million overweight dogs and 33 million overweight cats in the United States alone, the demand for obesity management programs is likely to grow in the coming years.

However, despite the rising prevalence of obesity and the increasing recognition of the issue, there is a lack of consensus on the best ways to address it. While some veterinary professionals advocate for strict diet restrictions and exercise regimens, others believe that a more holistic approach is needed. In order to effectively manage obesity in pets, it is important to consider the individual needs and circumstances of each pet and owner.
Letting our cats and dogs become overweight can carry a hefty penalty – both financially and in terms of their quality of life. We wanted to include consideration of the potential costs of disease impacted by excessive weight on the next piece to our report.

Just like with humans, animals with too much excess weight are likely to have shorter lifespans. They can be more at risk of developing certain diseases and at least, many conditions can be worsened by concurrent obesity.

With access to a massive database of pet insurance claims, we looked at some of the biggest obesity-linked health problems for cats and dogs:

1. Osteoarthritis (arthritis)
2. Diabetes mellitus (diabetes)
3. Cruciate ligament disease/ruptures (dogs only)
4. Lower urinary tract disease including cystitis and urethral obstruction (cats only)
5. Brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome/BOAS (dogs only)

These represent a huge cost burden for pet owners and the pet insurance industry, representing a paid-out penalty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Average Cost in 2018</th>
<th>Average Cost in 2022</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arthritis</td>
<td>£164.89</td>
<td>£311.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>£313.52</td>
<td>£369.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cruciate ligament disease</td>
<td>£1,152.02</td>
<td>£1,578.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower urinary tract disease</td>
<td>£384.13</td>
<td>£752.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, the percentage of total annual claims closed from 2018 and 2022 has increased for both arthritis and diabetes, while percentage of total annual claims closed for cruciate disease and BOAS have declined slightly. This is likely multifactorial, however there is doubt the overall number of claims for arthritis linked condition has increased noticeably over the last four years.

It continues to be a worry amongst pet health professionals and pet owners that pets are overweight or, at least, overweight. These pets can also result in higher day-to-day costs for pet parents, as they can require larger doses of medications and are being fed larger volumes of food.
Using the data we collected, along with current resources on pet obesity, we were able to determine four key areas that could help deter owners from gaining weight.
Four themes kept coming up time and time again, giving us a clearer idea of what is impeding progress against the growing problem of pet weight gain.

**PET LIFESTYLE**

Our data reiterated a number of known factors within the pet community about obesity regarding a few points of education for vet teams that can help make a pet owner's journey with weight a more positive one. Here are a few:

- **Checking their pet's weight:** Over 80% of pet owners are aware that checking their pet's weight is important for their pet's health.
- **Exercising:** 41% of dog owners and 12% of cat owners stated that having their pet neutered had caused them to gain weight.
- **Eating healthy foods:** However, when it comes to whether health conditions cause weight gain, generally pet health conditions don't cause weight gain.
- **Exercising:** 51% of cat owners giving this reason.

**MEDICAL TOUCHPOINTS**

Four themes kept coming up time and time again, giving us a clearer idea of what is impeding progress against the growing problem of pet weight gain.

- **Diet:** overfeeding is the number one cause of weight gain in pets, with around one-in-ten suggesting that the reason their pet was overweight was excessive feeding.
- **Lack of exercise:** This correlates with expert opinion. 33% of veterinary professionals say it is one major possible contributor to weight gain.
- **Pet behavior:** A minority of pet parents suspected that neutering has played a part in their pet's weight gain, with only 16% of dog owners and 12% of cat owners stating that having their pet castrated or spayed had caused them to gain weight.
- **Pet behavior:** 33% of veterinary professionals believe that neutering can have an impact on weight gain – 33% of veterinary professionals believe that neutering can have an impact on weight gain.

**P E T  T H I N G S  W E  A L R E A D Y  K N O W**

Communique breakdown: the problem areas

**Healthline bad habit of dining:**

- **Diet:** pet owners want to help pets lead a healthy lifestyle.

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Taking what we know from our research and the survey data, we believe that the best area to invest time and resource is in the prevention of pet obesity at those crucial early stages. We know the tools are already in place — it’s just a matter of using them more effectively.

We presented our findings to a panel of pet health professionals who have a variety of vast experience working with pets parents on matters of weight. Together, they reviewed the data and discussed what they thought needed to change to positively impact the number of obese pets in the UK.

They came up with four key objectives.

1. Starting healthy, staying healthy: integrate the topic of weight from birth

   Begin discussing pet weight management early in a pet’s life journey, such as during wellness plans, insurance policies, early routine procedures like neutering, or adoption from breeders or shelters. Engage pet parents when they are most receptive, setting a foundation and motivation for lifelong healthy pet weight.

   Conversation Starters:
   - How can we make the introduction of weight management a positive and exciting part of the pet ownership journey, just like vaccines or parasite prevention?
   - What tools and resources can be provided to new pet parents to support healthy weight habits from the start?
   - Should there be incentives or rewards for pet parents who maintain their pets at a healthy weight from an early age?

2. Little by little: make weight discussions routine

   Implement technology-driven nudges for veterinary professionals to record pet weights and body condition scores. Encourage pet parents to note their pets’ weights regularly throughout their pet’s life, especially at the neutering stage, and help them proactively manage their pet’s weight.

   Conversation Starters:
   - What are effective ways to incorporate pet weight discussions into routine veterinary visits? Can clinic systems require a weight and BCS to be entered before a physical exam or appointment notes can be saved/completed?
   - How can technology, like apps or reminders, make it easier to understand the health impacts of their pet’s weight and help them track their pet’s weight and health at home?
   - Should there be a rewards system or recognition for pet parents who consistently monitor their pet’s weight and keep it within ideal range?

3. Tech that works together: integration of pet weight tools

   Unify various pet weight management tools, such as apps, weight checks, and educational resources, into one seamless ecosystem that fits into pet owners’ daily lives. Promote engagement and accountability by making these tools more accessible and user-friendly.

   Conversation Starters:
   - What are the most effective ways to integrate pet weight management tools into pet parents’ everyday routines? Can we use these to encourage more regular involvement from them at home?
   - How can technology streamline data collection and sharing between pet owners and veterinary professionals?
   - Should there be a universal platform that consolidates pet weight information from various sources for easy access and monitoring? Could this prompt owners to make adjustments when their pets body condition changes?

4. Championing veterinary teams: strengthening the toolkit

   Streamline and consolidate available resources for veterinary teams to create a comprehensive, and cohesive weight management program. Develop effective communication plans to motivate veterinary professionals to prioritize weight management as a fundamental aspect of pet healthcare.

   Conversation Starters:
   - What resources are currently available to veterinary teams, and how can we centralize and enhance these tools for better impact? Can we bring this early on to veterinary students about to head into practice to build confidence in addressing pet weight?
   - How can we ensure that weight management and education on food portions becomes an integral part of every veterinary practice’s protocol?
   - How can we create an “all in one toolkit” that is easy to access, fast, and effective for vet teams? How can we make this more readily accessible for teams?
**FUTUROLOGIST THEORIES**

*Pet professionals*

**Why not a shared pet facility on site?**

Modern Build to Rent developments already offer game rooms with wet bars to drink, fitness rooms, games rooms and shared play areas. But what about a more shared pets? Why not have a space where residents can exercise their pets and meet other pet owners?

Claire Wolfenden, A1 VN Assessor

Mrs. Sarah Ellen Tranter, RVN

Mrs. Claire Wolfenden, Qualified VN RVN CertCFVHNut (Nutrition)

Ms. Georgia Woods-Lee, BSc (Hons)

DACVIM DECVIM-CA MRCVS

Pet health professionals in years to come, with new smaller breeds to dominate. Larger breeds might also look at the carbon footprint of the pet food chain.

Honey, I shrunk the dog…

Fashion may have created the recent trend for smaller dogs, with lower food and exercise requirements. It can mean you can buy cheaper foods in smaller quantities. But that can make it tricky to meet their exercise needs, and too much compromise on quality. And busy lifestyles make it tricky to find a routine to get them out each day. With key recommendations for immediate change, we spoke with Applied Futurologist, Tom Cheesewright, who revealed what the future of pet health could look like.

**What is the answer?**

If we don’t find a way to include our pets in this world, their health may become a deciding factor in where we choose to live. Introducing sustainable pet health professionals, here he shines a light on trend-led scenarios that could exacerbate or ameliorate the problem of pet obesity.

**The metaverse**

Humans are spending more and more time in the virtual world, exercising in virtual environments to keep fit. With the advent of the metaverse, a VR headset on a dog and treadmills can be dangerous for safety regulations in mind for our four legged friends. And do we have pet friendly Pelotons designed with health and sustainability in mind? The metaverse allows us to mix the real world with the digital, so what we might see is future exercise games that include our pets, creating a space for humans and pets to enjoy exercising together.

The metaverse headset can identify your dog and show you the map of your area overlaid with virtual dog parks, or turn the living room or kitchen into a race to escape a horde of invading aliens together. Your pets, creating a space for humans and pets to enjoy exercising healthy in the virtual world.

**THEORIES**

Most often when looking at the future, I find the greatest moments of change are an easy choice amongst systems that work well and are already established. Or by looking for new ways to innovate old solutions, as has been our pattern in the future of pet health. With many different factors, said Tom. So what we are looking at is a future where our pets are our companions, our exercise partners, our forever friends. And that is a world we could live in, if we are prepared to adapt.

We wanted to know how the trends of tomorrow could influence the fight against pet obesity in the long-term. With key recommendations for immediate change, we spoke with Applied Futurologist, Tom Cheesewright, who revealed what the future of pet health could look like. With many different factors, said Tom. So what we are looking at is a future where our pets are our companions, our exercise partners, our forever friends. And that is a world we could live in, if we are prepared to adapt.

The phenomenon of ‘city flight’ has largely been seen as an important reason for decamp to the country to keep our pets fit. Exercise is a huge component of our pets’ health, but we can’t compromise on quality. And busy lifestyles make it tricky to find a routine to get them out each day. With key recommendations for immediate change, we spoke with Applied Futurologist, Tom Cheesewright, who revealed what the future of pet health could look like.

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