

Nutrition 101 with Dr. Elder

Obesity is the most common nutritional disorder in dogs and cats in the United States and is a form of malnutrition.

Estimates are that 24% – 44% of dogs and cats in the United States are overweight.

A 1999 study was conducted to examine the prevalence of the most common disorders in a population of more than 30,000 dogs and 15,000 cats. This study revealed dental calculus and gingivitis as the two most common problems with 20% of dogs and 24% of cats having dental calculus. A finding not reported in this study, however, was a retrospective analysis that revealed that approximately 28% of dogs and cats were considered overweight or obese.

Chronic health problems associated with obesity include (to name a few): decreased life expectancy, pulmonary and cardiovascular disease, arthritis, compromised immune function, pancreatitis, diabetes mellitus, and increased morbidity and mortality following anesthesia.

Managing obesity is both extraordinarily simple and extremely difficult for both humans and companion animals. Weight management is simple in that the root cause of obesity is an imbalance between energy intake and energy output. Most cases of obesity result from over-eating, under-exercising or both. Managing obesity is difficult in that unlike many addictions in life (alcohol and illicit drugs) that can be stopped, we cannot stop eating.

So, to enumerate the causes of obesity in a simple form:

- 1) Over-eating
- 2) Lack of exercise
- 3) Genetics
- 4) Endocrine disorders
- 5) Gonadectomy
- 6) Aging

Diagnosing obesity in clinic: Use the Body Condition Score (BCS). Scales used include a 1 – 5 score or 1 – 9 score from very thin to obese.

Treating obesity:

- 1) Control underlying endocrine disease.
- 2) Induce a negative energy balance by decreasing food intake, increasing exercise or both with a goal of 1% to 2% weight loss per week.
- 3) Use a modified calorie intake using a maintenance diet or prescription diet and reduce the number of treats being given to the pet (baby carrots, celery or green beans make a nice

low-calorie treat for most dogs).

- 4) Weigh animal periodically and reevaluate recommendations.
- 5) For cats, in particular, I would recommend feeding Purina Pro Plan as this diet has the highest protein content of any dry food on the market. High protein diets in cats have been shown to reduce obesity and the likelihood of development of diabetes mellitus.

Pet food labels must contain the following:

- 1) Product name.
- 2) Net weight of product.
- 3) Name and address of manufacturer.
- 4) Guaranteed analysis.
- 5) List of ingredients – listed in decreasing order of predominance by weight.
- 6) The words “dog or cat food”.
- 7) Statement of nutrition adequacy – a statement describing the intended use of the diet and the method for determining nutritional adequacy (see below).
- 8) Feeding guidelines.

9 criteria used to determine whether you should recommend a particular pet food to a client:

- 1) The food label should contain the phrase “complete and balanced”.
- 2) The “complete and balanced” claim should be substantiated using AAFCO feeding trials, not the calculation method.
- 3) The label should contain a toll free phone number for asking questions and obtaining additional information about the product.
- 4) The product should have a minimum digestibility of at least 80% if a popular diet and at least 86% if a premium diet.
- 5) A whole protein source as the first listed ingredient on the ingredient list.
- 6) If feeding a dry product, it should contain a natural preservative such as tocopherols (vitamin E) or ascorbic acid (vitamin C) or synthetic preservative (BHA, BHT, or ethoxyquin).
- 7) Cost – studies indicate that over the life-span of an animal premium foods are no more costly than popular diet as generally the premium diets are significantly higher in caloric density (meaning less is fed to the pet as compared to popular diets).
- 8) “Animals require nutrients, not ingredients”. The quantity and quality of nutrients in the diet available to the animal is what is important, not the ingredients that provided these nutrients. There is a common misperception, for example, that corn is a filler, is poorly digested and causes allergies. Fillers are ingredients that serve no nutritional purpose and corn does not fit that description. Corn provides essential amino acids, an essential fatty acid (linoleic acid) and complex carbohydrates. In addition, corn is not listed among ingredients most often suspected to cause food allergies according to veterinary dermatologists.

9) How is the pet doing while eating a particular diet?

*This lecture is adapted from information provided by Dr. Sherry Sanderson at the University of Georgia.