

Does your pet have a weight problem? Here's how to tell

November 10 2017, by Gia Miller, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—Cats with diabetes, dogs with cancer, birds with high

cholesterol or even rabbits who cannot turn around to clean themselves—what do these animals all have in common?

They are either overweight or obese, and it's serious.

"We have a problem—almost all of American pets are overweight or obese," explained veterinarian Dr. Ernie Ward, founder of the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention.

"The latest statistics show that approximately 54 percent of dogs and 59 percent of cats are overweight or obese as determined by their veterinarian," Ward said.

How can you tell if your pet is overweight?

For more common pets, such as dogs and cats, Ward recommends looking at their belly fat.

If their belly is hanging down or dragging on the floor, it's a problem.

You should also be able to feel your pet's ribs—they should feel like the knuckles on your hand when you make a fist.

But for more exotic pets—such as birds, rabbits, ferrets or guinea pigs—it may be harder to tell, and you must visit your vet, said veterinarian Dr. Laurie Hess. She's a bird and exotic animal specialist.

To determine if a pet is overweight or obese, veterinarians use something called the Body Condition Score, or BCS, according to Ward and Hess.

This looks at lean muscle mass, the size of the animal, where they carry their weight and excess abdominal fat.

In her practice, Hess often sees obese birds, rabbits and even ferrets.

"The saddest obese animal I've ever seen was a pet possum that was so grossly obese it couldn't stand up," Hess recalled.

Overweight or obese animals aren't cute, according to Ward.

It's a hazard to their health, shortening their life span, and your wallet as you pay for expensive treatments, Ward and Hess warned.

"Sadly, most of the medical conditions we see in humans who suffer from excess weight, we see in dogs and cats," Ward said.

"Overweight pets can suffer from osteoarthritis, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, kidney disease and many forms of cancer. There is clear evidence that they are associated with excess fat issues, and it affects pets' quality of life," he explained.

"If you want your pet to live a happier life, you have to keep it at a lean weight," Ward said.

There's also a financial burden associated with poor pet health.

Diabetes treatments for cats are a minimum of \$1,000-\$2,000 per year, and osteoarthritis costs at least \$500-\$1,000 to treat, according to Ward.

For more exotic pets, such as a bird with a heart condition, Hess explained that you cannot perform heart surgery, so regular blood work and visits to the vet are necessary to monitor their health.

As in humans, proper diet and exercise are the answer to reducing excess pounds and maintaining a healthy weight.

Both Ward and Hess advise that pet owners follow instructions from their veterinarian as to how much food to feed their pet, and replace processed treats with fresh snacks such as baby carrots, green beans, lettuce or other vegetables, depending on the breed.

For pet owners who spend their day away from home, it is important to make sure the pet has enough exercise and stimulation during the day, Ward added.

For some, that could include hiring a pet sitter or walker.

"I have a friend who is a dog walker, and every day she goes to a house where there is an older Amazon parrot between 30 to 40 years old," Hess said. "She is paid to exercise the bird, and he is always excited to see her. He runs around the floor to her while she's there."

Both Ward and Hess suggest speaking to your veterinarian about your pet's weight at every visit.

"If your vet doesn't want to talk about it, find a new vet," Ward said.

More information: For more on pet obesity and how to help an overweight pet, visit the [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention](#).

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Citation: Does your pet have a weight problem? Here's how to tell (2017, November 10) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-11-pet-weight-problem.html>

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