

The Weight of Silence: Opinions, Attitudes and Solutions for the Pet Obesity Crisis

Ernie Ward, DVM

“America’s Pet Advocate”

Calabash, NC

DrErnieWard@gmail.com

Abstract

Over half the dogs and cats in the United States are now classified as overweight by their veterinarian.¹ Recent surveys suggest that most veterinarians aren't discussing the serious health threat of obesity and that pet owners are desperate for help. If veterinarians continue ignoring nutritional education, not only will our patients suffer, but also our practices will pay a price in decreased visits and revenue. The veterinary profession must address these issues and develop strategies to promote healthier lifestyles, encourage nutritional counseling by veterinarians, and break the silence on the obesity conversation.

According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention’s (APOP) 2013 National Pet Obesity Awareness Day Survey conducted on over 1,400 dogs and cats by U.S. veterinarians, 52.6% of adult dogs and 57.6% of adult cats were classified as overweight or obese. Obesity by itself is classified as a disease, but the health conditions associated with obesity reveal the heart of the epidemic’s impact on pets and their owners. Osteoarthritis, Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, joint injury, various forms of cancer, and decreased life expectancy are all linked to obesity in pets. The American Animal Hospital Association’s 2014 Weight Management Guidelines for Dogs and Cats reports that up to 59% of dogs and cats are overweight, making this the most common nutritional disorder identified in veterinary practice. Excess weight can reduce longevity and adversely affect quality of life.² Weight

Glossary of Abbreviations

AMA: American Medical Association

APOP: Association for Pet Obesity Prevention

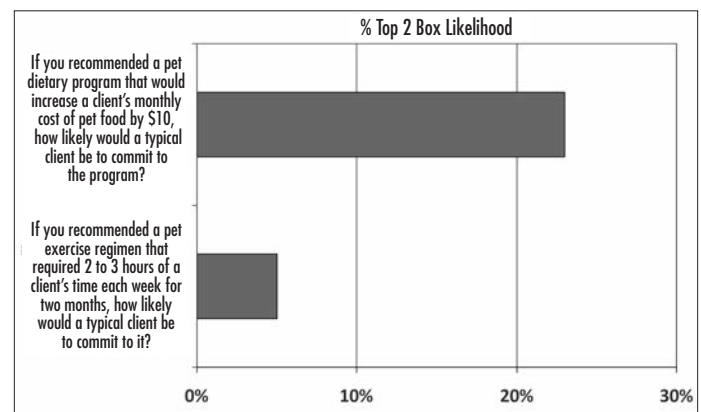
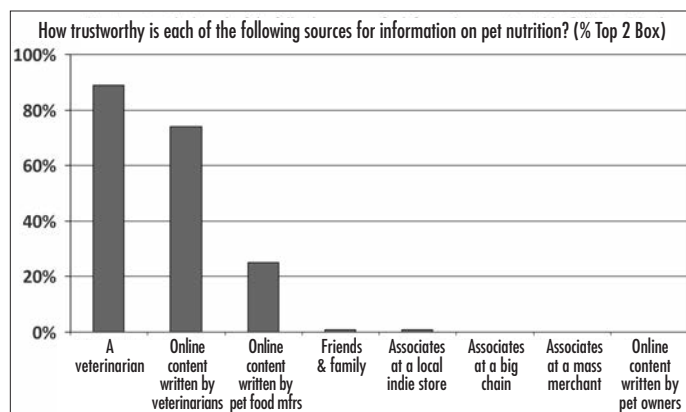
management, including obesity prevention and treatment, remains a challenge for veterinarians and clients alike.²

What do veterinarians think about pet obesity and their role in treatment and prevention? In November 2013, APOP and Trone Brand Energy, a North Carolina-based

marketing firm focused on animal health care needs, interviewed 548 veterinarians and found out (95% confidence with a margin of error of +/-4.17%).³ In general terms, veterinarians felt that while they considered themselves to be the most trustworthy source of animal nutrition information, 68% reported they would like more education and training.

Veterinarians (93%) overwhelmingly agreed that obesity is a “big deal.” Paradoxically, 36% of veterinarians conceded that they don’t discuss a pet’s weight with a client unless the pet is overweight. Veterinarians also estimated that 50% of dogs and 50% of cats were overweight. The survey showed that 93% of veterinarians reported they would like pet food manufacturers to be more involved in educating pet owners about the risks associated with pet obesity. In the survey, only about 8% of veterinarians felt that pet food manufacturers were helpful in educating owners about the risks of pet obesity. Although veterinarians generally didn’t credit manufacturers with adequately educating pet owners about pet obesity, not all veterinarians thought food choice was linked to pet obesity, with just under 50% agreeing that the right pet food would reduce a pet’s risk of becoming obese.

Veterinarians weren’t confident that clients would follow through on exercise or dietary programs with their pets. This

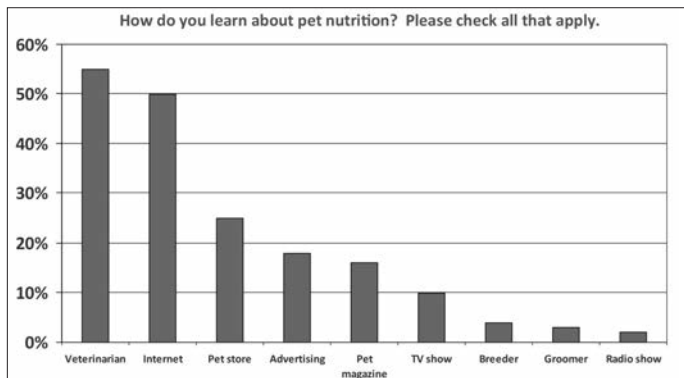


could be due, in part, to the lack of programs that help owners comply and hold them accountable, something APOP hopes to effect through upcoming industry partnerships and programs.

In the survey, 55% of veterinarians reported being under-equipped to fight pet obesity and said they would welcome a host of tools that are proposed to be part of the APOP coalition and upcoming efforts.

What types of tools do you think would help the veterinary community more consistently implement pet obesity management programs? Please check all that apply.	
Digital application (exercise and weight tracker)	68%
Client education videos	57%
CE webinars	41%
Educational articles	55%
Nutrition and exercise logs	62%
Case studies	28%

We also interviewed 590 pet owners in December 2013 to get their opinions on pet obesity (95% confidence with a margin of error of +/-4.04%). Veterinarians were the top source of pet nutrition information for pet owners with the Internet a close second. Veterinarians also were clearly a trusted information source for pet owners.



How trustworthy is each of the following sources of information on pet nutrition? (% Top 2 Box)	
Your veterinarian	80%
Friends and family	31%
Pet store associates at a big chain store like PetSmart or Petco	23%
Store associate at a mass merchant such as Target or Walmart	8%
Online content about pet obesity written by pet owners	21%
Online content about pet obesity written by veterinarians	56%
Online content about pet obesity written by pet food manufacturers	20%
Online product reviews of pet food written by pet owners (like on Amazon.com)	25%

When asked, half of pet owners didn't recall ever receiving nutritional counsel from anyone in the veterinary clinic. Of those who did receive consultation, 75% felt the information was helpful.

The "fat gap" is rampant. Of those responding, 82% of pet owners indicated that their pets were at a healthy weight, compared to veterinary estimates that 50% of pets are obese. Simultaneously, nearly half (42%) of pet owners conceded that they didn't know what a "healthy weight" was for their pet.

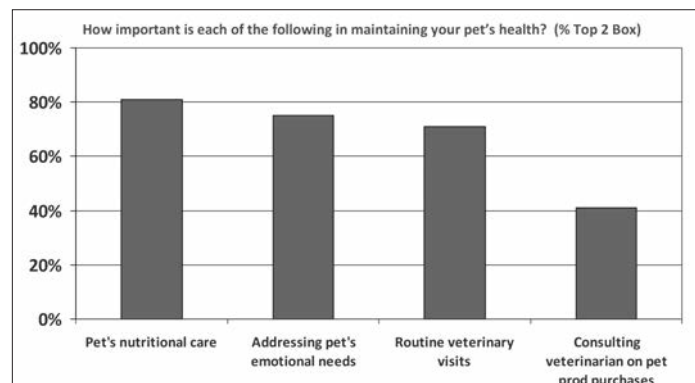
Have you ever received nutritional consultation for your pet from any of the following people? Please check all that apply.	
Your veterinarian	44%
Veterinarian technician	16%
Other veterinary staff	8%
None of the above	50%

Pet owners most strongly associated a decreased life span with pet obesity. Longevity should be highly considered as a key "reason to believe" for consumer communications. Nearly three-quarters, 72%, of surveyed pet owners indicated that decreased life expectancy was linked to pet obesity.

Pet owners were more likely than veterinarians to believe food choice affects obesity. Of those surveyed, 58% of pet owners agreed with the statement, "The right pet food decreases a pet's chances of becoming obese," though only 48% of veterinarians agreed. This is great news for manufacturers as they stand to sell more specialty foods through veterinarians and for veterinarians who can catch up to owners' propensities and retail more specialty diets.

Nutritional and dietary solutions were the most appealing course of action for pet owners with an obese pet. The weight-management programs will need to be packaged well and involve a veterinary team effort to gain consumer uptake. The barrier to switch to a premium-priced diet is perhaps lower than most manufacturers and veterinarians predict, with 62% of pet owners indicating they would pay a \$10 monthly premium if it would help their pet lose weight. Of those surveyed, 61% of pet owners stated they would commit to an exercise regimen for their pet that required two to three hours each week for two months if their veterinarian recommended it.

As demonstrated in our survey, pet owners believe nutritional care and pet food are of primary importance in enabling best care.



Talking about Obesity with Pet Owners

The first step toward improving the lives and well-being of the pets we're entrusted to care for and to end this epidemic is to start talking about it. We know that being overweight and obese is bad for pets. Why aren't we talking about it more often?

In a 2004 study published in *Obesity Research*,⁴ 52.6% of obese human patients who did not undergo bariatric surgery reported that their primary care physician “never” or only “once in a while” discussed their morbid obesity with them. In other words, unless the obese patient was going to have surgery, their doctor rarely mentioned their weight. One of the key reasons physicians fail to counsel their patients about obesity may lie in their perceived distrust in the success of available treatments. They see lots of weight-loss options and lots of overweight people; the math simply doesn’t add up. When confronted with the decision to discuss something you don’t believe works, you’re unlikely to discuss it.

It’s no different in veterinary medicine. Veterinarians see lots of overweight and obese pets and lots of diet foods and diet treatments, yet the number of fat pets keeps growing. Subsequently, we stop talking about it. Nobody likes to bet on a losing horse, especially one that we believe loses with patient after patient, day after day.

Our clients depend on us for recommendations to improve the quality of life as well as life expectancy of their pets. However, due to busy schedules and lack of training in weight-related disorders, nutrition and weight loss, it is often difficult for veterinarians to communicate this information and promote change. For our profession to truly help our patients, we must take the time to learn about these issues and talk about them with our clients.

If we’re going to talk about pet obesity, we must believe it’s important — really important. Veterinarians who understand that achieving and maintaining ideal weight will improve their patient’s quality of life and life expectancy are more enthusiastic about the topic. We must study the association between obesity and conditions such as Type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis, hypertension, heart disease, cancer, and others. We must become familiar with the impact a pet’s weight-associated morbidity has on the pet-family bond and how this can negatively influence the level of care a pet receives as he or she ages. We must search for simple lifestyle changes that can make huge improvements in a pet’s well-being. We must feel comfortable looking a client in the eye and confidently discussing strategies for losing weight in a nonthreatening manner. Once you believe in something, others sense that passion and are more inclined to listen and believe in you.

Another potential source of bias against counseling clients about their pet’s weight issue is the veterinarian’s perception that the client doesn’t care or want to hear about it. If a veterinarian enters the room and thinks that the client isn’t motivated to change a pet’s weight, he or she probably is not going to start talking about obesity. Unfortunately, we’re often wrong. In the same manner that we prejudge clients and their willingness to pay for medical care, we often incorrectly assume that clients don’t want to learn about pet weight loss or nutrition. This issue becomes even more challenging if we don’t truly believe in the benefits of weight loss or spending

our precious time educating clients about it. If we assume that everyone will be willing to pay for our services and is interested in improving their pet’s quality of life, regardless of the challenges, we will better serve them.

Because of the social stigma associated with being overweight and obese, many human doctors simply find it more comfortable to avoid the topic altogether. Further, a few high-profile media cases involving patients suing physicians for offending them while discussing their weight has heightened fears and decreased the number of doctors being proactive about weight issues. The American Medical Association (AMA) commented on this dilemma in November 2003: “If your patient’s weight is a health issue, you should not hesitate to approach the topic.”⁵

Regardless of the client’s weight, our responsibility is to the pet. With this in mind, we must feel comfortable separating our client’s obesity from the discussion of their pet. Normally, the client is aware that their pet is overweight or obese yet may not fully understand its impact on their pet’s health. Instead of stating the obvious, “Did you know Fluffy is obese?”, try saying, “I’m concerned about Fluffy’s weight because I’m worried it may be causing health problems for her. Do you think her weight is causing health problems?” This is especially important when the patient has weight-associated conditions such as osteoarthritis, Type 2 diabetes or hypertension.

If you receive a noncommittal or disinterested response, don’t start detailing how diet and exercise can help Fluffy achieve an ideal weight. Instead, focus on the long-term health risks associated with Fluffy’s excess weight. “I know how much you care about Fluffy and that’s why I want to help you avoid some serious disease such as diabetes, heart disease and arthritis.” Center the conversation on the prevention of debilitating and often costly diseases as opposed to the latest diet fad or tool.

Show Unconditional Support & Acceptance

It is vital that you demonstrate unconditional support and acceptance when confronting obesity. Admit that weight loss is a challenge for everyone, including veterinarians, and that you understand the difficulties firsthand. Share your own struggles, and you’ll gain the trust of your clients.

Clients also will respond more favorably to your recommendations if they feel understood. A 2001 *Annals of Internal Medicine* article⁶ demonstrated that by communicating empathically doctors had higher diagnostic accuracy, patients adhered more frequently to the recommended therapies, and patient and physician satisfaction was higher in a shorter amount of time. The hallmarks of empathic communication involve active listening skills including the use of nonverbal cues such as maintaining good eye contact, nodding in agreement, and leaning toward the client to convey interest in what they are saying; framing the client’s statements to

demonstrate that you understand what they are saying (“Let me see if I have this right: Fluffy began gaining weight after a new neighbor moved in next door.”); reflecting the emotional tone of the client’s statements to show you understand how they feel (“Yes, I know how frustrating this can be.”); and involving the clients as partners in the care of their pet (“Is there anything I left out?” or “Does that sound right to you?”).

Partnerships with our clients are a vital component of any successful medical recommendation. It is critical that we match our treatment plan with our client’s preferences, abilities and readiness for change. This is in contrast to the traditional directive approach in which we simply tell the client what they need to do because we say they need to do it. Today’s client no longer accepts everything a veterinarian says as valid without challenge. This isn’t a threat or creation of an adversarial relationship but rather a cry for involvement. We should encourage our clients to discuss their lifestyle patterns (What, how much, when, and where they feed and exercise their pets?), why they think it’s important for their pet to lose weight, what signs of improvement do they expect in what timeframe, and what challenges do they foresee (multiple cats on various diets). By actively partnering with clients, we allow them to help us tailor a treatment plan that is more likely to succeed as opposed to dictating the terms for change.

In addition to accepting a weight-loss or other health plan, we also must be certain our clients understand it. Don’t rely on the old standard “Do you understand?” Everyone nods blankly in agreement because the last thing they want to do is to be lectured — again. Try using the “teach-back method.” After you explain how much and how frequently you want the client to feed their pet, ask “Would you mind explaining that feeding plan to me so I can make sure I didn’t leave out anything?” This technique works well for medications, follow-up care or any actions that your clients need to complete on their own.

Winning the war against pet obesity will not be easy. There is no “magic cure” or “silver bullet.” Even with today’s

amazing technological advances, the foundation for long-term success depends on changing veterinarians’ and pet owners’ attitudes toward pet weight issues and adopting a healthier lifestyle for their pets. The fantastic opportunity we have as veterinarians is that we may, by extension, positively impact the health and well-being of our human clients. It is time to make a stand and stop ignoring one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in our pet patients and their owners. Educate yourself, develop a communication strategy and uphold the oath we took when we entered our profession to help each and every pet.

References

1. Association for Pet Obesity Prevention. Obesity Plagues Pets, Industry Being Challenged to Effect Change. March 31, 2014. <http://www.petobesityprevention.org/pet-obesity-remains-at-epidemic-levels-according-to-new-research/>
2. Brooks D, Churchill J, Fein K, et al. 2014 AAHA Weight Management Guidelines for Dogs and Cats. *J An Anim Hosp Assoc.* 2014;50:1-11.
3. Trone Brand Energy (proprietary research). January 2014. (Reprinted by permission)
4. Anderson DA, Wadden TA. Bariatric Surgery Patients’ Views of Their Physicians’ Weight-Related Attitudes and Practices. *Obes Res.* 2004;12:1587-1595.
5. Assessment and Management of Adult Obesity: A Primer for Physicians. November 2003. American Medical Association. <http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/resources/upload/docs/what/bias/AMAprimerforobesitycommunication.pdf>
6. Coulehan JL, Platt FW, Egener B, et al. “Let Me See If I Have This Right ...”: Words That Help Build Empathy. *Ann Intern Med.* 2001;135:221-227. doi:10.7326/0003-4819-135-3-200108070-00022.