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## Wonder Where That Fat Cat Learned to Eat?

By Jane E. Brody

There's certainly more truth than poetry in the expression "like father, like son." And when it comes to excess weight and obesity in dogs and cats, it's often "like owner, like pet." "Obesity is considered one of the most common nutritional problems in cats and dogs," two scientists from the University of California, Davis, reported last year at the Waltham International Nutritional Sciences Symposium in Washington. "Studies in Western Europe and the United States have indicated that more than 24% of dogs and about 25% of domestic cats are obese," the veterinarians, Jon Ramsey and Kevork Hagopian, noted. The findings were published this month in *The Journal of Nutrition*.

Not surprisingly, one study found a strong correlation between excess weight in pet owners and in their pets. Still, there are many normal-weight pet owners with dogs or cats that are dangerously overweight.

### Studying Obesity Abroad

For example, while many (though clearly not all) French women may be slim, their dogs often are not. A team from Maisons-Alfort, France, found that among a "healthy population" of 616 dogs that attended a vaccination clinic, 38.8% were overweight, including 5% that were obese.

Another team, Paul Trayhurn, Chen Bing and I. Stuart Wood, obesity specialists from the University of Liverpool, said, "Although the focus remains very much on obesity in humans, the disorder and its sequelae are also a growing concern in companion animals," they added.

Lest you think your overweight pet is merely cute, the consequences are not. The list of health problems, like those that can afflict overweight and obese humans, is long indeed and can render your beloved pet old -- or dead -- before its time.

In most cases, dogs and cats are classified as overweight when their body weight is 15% above what is deemed "optimal" for their breed, and they are considered obese when their weight exceeds 30% above optimal.

Just as mothers have been shown to underestimate excess weight and obesity in their children, researchers have found that pet owners are notoriously poor at assessing their pets' weight problems. "My dog isn't fat; he just has a lot of fur" is an all-too-common response when owners are accused of overfeeding their pets.

The French researchers, for example, found that owners chronically underestimated their dogs' "body composition" when compared with the veterinarian's assessment.

Before you feed your pet another treat or table scrap, stop and think, "Are you really doing your pet a favor?" Consider the potential consequences of overfeeding and the resulting excess weight that is bound to accumulate.

**Orthopedic Problems** -- Arthritis and other joint disorders, fractures in the forelegs, hip dysplasia, rupture of ligaments, and spinal disk disease.

**Metabolic Disorders** -- Glucose intolerance, insulin resistance, and high blood levels of cholesterol and other heart-damaging fats.

**Hormonal Disorders** -- Low levels of thyroid and pituitary hormones, excessive stress hormones, and diabetes.

**Respiratory Disorders** -- Tracheal collapse, sleep apnea, and paralysis of the larynx.

**Urogenital Problems** -- Kidney stones, urinary incontinence and difficulty giving birth.

**Malignancies** -- Mammary and bladder cancer.

**Other Health Problems** -- Exercise intolerance, heat intolerance and heat stroke, decreased immune function, hypertension, shortness of breath, and decreased lifespan.

Along with the diseases and discomfort that can result from fat in companion animals come exorbitant veterinary bills. It is often challenging to detect their health problems early and treat them while they may still be reversible.

### Causes and Treatment

Genetics can play a role in a pet's tendency to become overweight.

Dog breeds especially at risk include the Labrador retriever, cairn terrier, Cavalier King Charles spaniel, Scottish terrier, cocker spaniel. In cats, the domestic shorthair.

Being neutered is an important risk factor for obesity both in dogs and cats.

In the French study, neutered dogs were more than twice as likely to be overweight as intact dogs. And since all pets should be neutered unless you plan to breed the animal for profit, special care must be taken to be sure your neutered companion doesn't accumulate excessive body fat.

Female dogs are more likely to be overweight than males. As with people, age is a factor, with middle-aged pets at a greater risk than the younger ones.

The French found that even in young animals risk rises with age, with 2- and 3-year-old dogs nearly three times as likely to be overweight as 1-year-olds. And dogs over 12 years old are 12 times as likely as 1-year-olds to be overweight.

Pets that get little exercise and spend most of their time indoors are more likely to gain extra weight than those with a yard or field to run in or those taken out often to exercise.

#### Garbage Disposal With Four Legs

But, and this is significant, owner behavior can play a major role. Various studies have linked overweight pets to their owners' tendency to feed them table scraps, to the pets' presence at the table when their owners dine, and to the owners' misinterpretation of their pets' behavior.

Dr. Alexander J. German of the University of Liverpool Small Animal Hospital in England pointed out that "many owners misread signals about the behavior of their cat associated with eating."

"When the cat initiates contact, owners often assume that they are hungry and are asking for food when they are not," Dr. German said. "Nevertheless, if food is provided at such times, the cat soon learns that initiating contact results in a food reward."

The most effective treatment for excess weight in companion animals is a decrease in caloric intake and an increase in physical activity. Consider using a "lite" commercial pet food rather than home-prepared meals for your pet.

Also, be sure to measure how much you feed your pet. Consult your veterinarian about the appropriate amount of food and the number of feedings each day. Keep the dog away from the table when you are eating, and resist the temptation to use your pet as a garbage can for the food you don't eat. A shepherd-lab mix named Jane that lives on my block became seriously overweight when the little boy in the family fed her the food he didn't want to eat.

Encourage your pet to get more exercise. That may prove doubly beneficial if you participate in the activity. In addition to walking more, your dog may enjoy swimming, playing catch or retrieving toys and balls. Cats enjoy playing too, with and without cat toys. Finally, make sure that your pet gets periodic weigh-ins. As people know all too well, regaining lost weight is easier than losing it in the first place.

People who weigh themselves daily have an easier time keeping their weight down. Make sure the vet weighs your pet at each visit and tells you whether it has gained weight since the last visit and is at risk of becoming too heavy.