

Exercising pets helps avoid fat cat and pudgy pooch

January 6 2015, by Dr. Camille Torres-Henderson

This time of year, busy schedules and frequently frigid weather make it harder to stick with healthy habits, such as taking the dog for a walk. Yet finding ways to exercise your dog and cat during the winter can benefit the whole family, and save your pet from becoming a fat cat or a pudgy pooch.

It's no surprise that dog owners walk almost twice as much in a week than do non-dog owners. What is a surprise is that Colorado – known for a relatively lean and pet-loving human population – ranks fourth in the number of overweight dogs and fifth in overweight cats in the state, according to the State of Pet Health 2014 report from Banfield Pet Hospital.

Nationally, the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention estimates that more than half of dogs and cats are overweight.

In the past few years, awareness of pet obesity has increased among veterinarians and pet owners, but we still suffer from a "fat gap," as many [pet owners](#) fail to recognize their pets' weight problems, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association. Extra weight can lead to diabetes, heart and lung disease, skin conditions, arthritis, [high blood pressure](#) and even cancer.

As you read this list, you'll see that health problems associated with obesity in pets are just like those linked to obesity in people. For this reason, we consider pet activity and exercise to be a cornerstone of

preventive care.

Benefits of exercising your pet include:

- Improved overall health: "The number one thing you can do is keep your dog at a healthy weight," says Dr. Felix Duerr, CSU's small-animal sports medicine specialist. "They will have less arthritis and live a longer, healthier life."
- Weight control: You should be able to feel your pet's ribs – not a layer of fat – beneath his fur. If you stand looking down at your pet, you should be able to see a waistline. From the side, the underbelly should be tucked up.
- Reduction of unwanted behavior: Exercise can cut down on chewing, digging, vocalizing and other unpleasant habits.
- Stronger muscles and improved flexibility: Strength and agility can decrease risk of injury for pets, just as they do for people.
- A stronger human-animal bond: Spending quality time with your pet will make you both happier.

We know cold weather can make us, and our pets, want to stay inside, so we've come up with some fun ways to create both physical and mental enrichment for your pet. Try these cold-weather ideas with your furry friend:

- Fetch: Dogs and cats enjoy playing fetch. Use different types of toys to keep the game interesting.
- Hide and seek: Hide food or low-calorie treats around the house. This is a great way to provide cats with mental stimulation any time of year.
- Food puzzles: These "toys" make the dog or cat work to get their food, which provides a great mental workout.
- Laser pointer: Both dogs and cats enjoy chasing the light around the house.

- Clicker training: Using a handheld device that makes a clicking sound is a great training tool for behavior modification in dogs and cats.
- Feather on a stick for your feline friend: Many cats love the thrill of hunting and chasing these feathers. It's a great way to get them up and moving.
- Plain-old walking: Bundle up and take your dog for a brisk walk if the temperature will allow. Start out quickly, and only allow pausing and sniffing on the return route. Consider booties to protect your dog's feet from the snow.

After the winter months pass, more rigorous exercise should be gradually reintroduced. As with people, excessive activity, especially after being sedentary for several months, can cause injury. Consult your veterinarian with questions regarding appropriate types of diet modification and [exercise](#) that can help keep your [pet](#) active and healthy this winter – and throughout its life.

Provided by Colorado State University

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