Countering pet obesity by rethinking feeding habits

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190 million Americans share the luxuries of human life with their pets. Giving dogs and cats a place in human homes, beds and—sometimes even, their wills—comes with the family member package.

Amongst these shared human-pet comforts is the unique luxury to overeat. As a result, the most common form of malnutrition for Americans and their companion animals results not from the underconsumption, but the overconsumption of food. The obesity epidemic also causes a similar array of diseases in people and pets: diabetes, hyperlipidemia and cancer.

During this year's ADSA-ASAS Joint Annual Meeting, five companion animal nutrition experts from around the world further examined the implications of over- or inaccurately feeding cats and dogs. "Companion Animal Symposium: Bioenergetics of pet food" was a part of the Companion Animal Science Program, an event sponsored annually by the George Fahey Appreciation Club.

Bioenergetics concern energy flow through living systems. Since obesity results from an imbalance of energy use and intake, bioenergetics help scientists understand the correlation between overweight animals and the food they consume.

The most definitive player in pet health is the owner. Dr. Kelly Swanson, Professor of Animal and Nutritional Sciences at the University of Illinois, says the first step in combating pet obesity is simply realizing that an animal is overweight.

"Owners need to actually recognize that their pet is obese, and is not just a funny, pudgy animal that looks cute," said Swanson. "Lean, healthy pets not only live longer, but more importantly, have a better quality of life."

In fact, some lifelong studies show that maintaining a lean body condition score (BCS 4 or 5) adds an average of 1.8 years to dogs' lives. Preserving steady body conditions requires owners to not just read pet food labels, but to actually understand and apply the feeding directions.

Food types and feeding frequencies also need to vary from animal to animal. Dr. Dennis Jewell, Research Scientist at Hill's Pet Nutrition, emphasized the customization of feeding programs to fit each individual.

"Each pet has unique genetics that determine, for example, if they're going to use more calories to maintain their body weight than other

animals," said Jewell. "We can design feeding programs for specific pet populations - based on factors like age, size, et cetera - but feeding regimens still come down to the individual pet."

For example, weight-loss regimens equate to the feeding of less energy-dense and more fiber-dense diets. Increased fiber intake results in less ad-libitum food consumption.

One overlooked feeding strategy may lie in the nature of the food itself. According to Dr. Katherine Kerr, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Florida, raw and whole-prey diets may provide a viable alternative to extruded ones. Her projects primarily focus on the eating patterns and nutritional health of African wildcats.

"While observing feeding behaviors, we soon recognized that felines aren't physiologically made to chew," said Kerr. "When feeding whole prey, they basically just crush the skull and swallow it whole."

The diets of wild-type cats include the hide, hair and bones of prey. When used in addition to other plant and animal fibers, these have a positive impact on energy metabolism and gut microbial populations. Meat-based and whole prey diets in domestic pets could yield similar results.

Kerr says that these types of diets are undervalued and under-researched nutritional therapy options. She believes they can play an essential role in health maintenance, and disease, allergy and obesity mitigation.

"The question, 'Should we mimic nature?' is often controversial," said Kerr. "We need to explore these diets more to find out the answer."

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