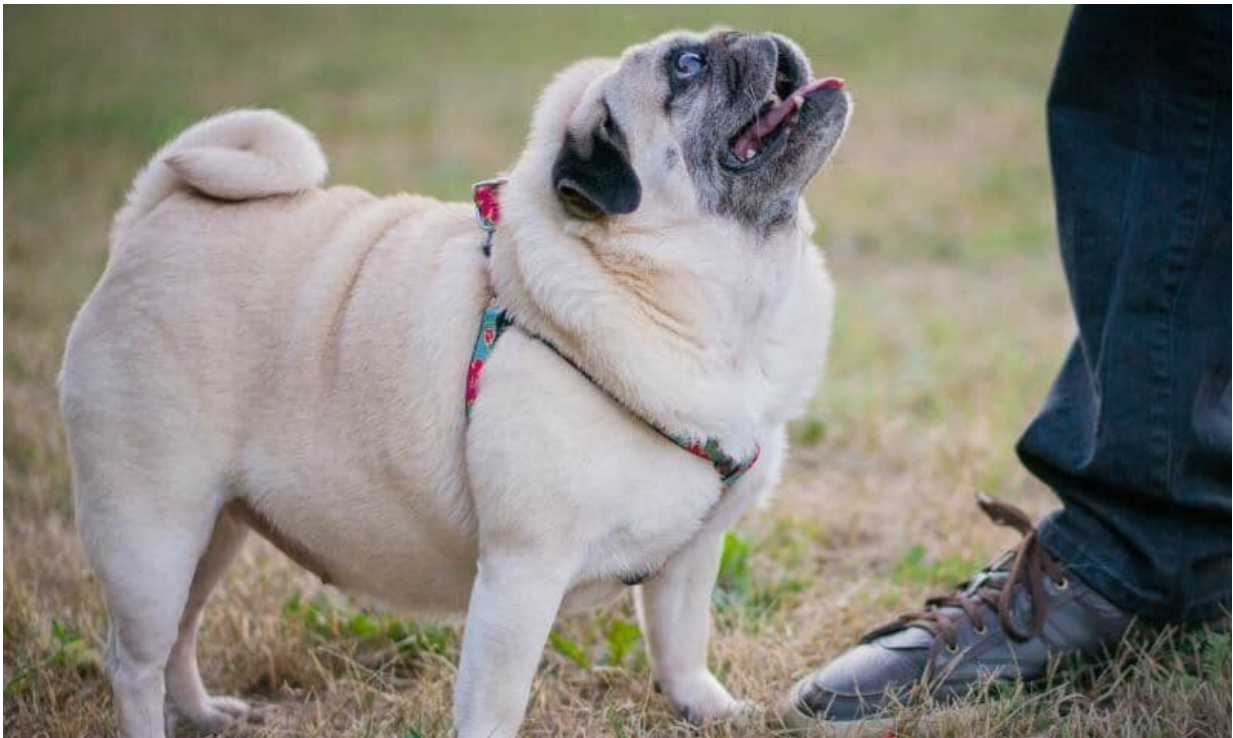


# Too many pets are packing on too many pounds

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Pets make us healthier. They can raise our spirits, extend our lives, lower our blood pressure and make us more active, research shows.

Do we do the same for them? If not, we may not be keeping up our end of the bargain.

The annual survey by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP), released in March, showed 60 percent of cats and 56 percent of dogs in America were classified as overweight or obese.

"We're seeing more dogs and cats falling into the obesity category, and that's where the greatest risk lies," said Dr. Ernie Ward, a North Carolina veterinarian who founded APOP in 2005. "We're encountering more weight-related diseases like high [blood pressure](#), diabetes, arthritis, cancers and [kidney disease](#)."

The organization compiles statistics by gathering body condition scores (a cat-and-dog equivalent to body mass index for humans) of pets who visit their vet for a general wellness exam on a given day in October. A total of 1,560 dogs and 646 cats in 41 states were assessed for the latest survey.

Whatever the numbers, few doubt that many pets—just like many of their owners—are packing too many pounds.

"Our pets are actually suffering when they're overweight," said Dr. Deborah Linder, head of the Tufts University Obesity Clinic for Animals in North Grafton, Massachusetts. "It's not that a fat pet is a happy pet. Their [quality of life](#) really decreases, but it can increase again once we get the weight off."

If your pet doesn't want to hop on the scale, Linder said there's a simple test for possible weight problems.

"If you feel over the back of your hand, that's exactly how padded your pet's ribs should be," she said. "There should be no more fat on them than there is on the back of your hand. If there is, start talking to your veterinarian."

The first thing the vet should tell you, Ward said, is that food does not equal love.

"We have an emotional bond with food that's unique to the human species," he said. "Champagne with celebrations, cakes with birthdays, turkeys with holidays. We naturally transfer that context to our pets. But they don't celebrate anniversaries. They just love the food."

At the Tufts clinic, Linder encourages owners to find ways to bond with their pets and demonstrate love that don't always involve food.

"Does seeing your pet happy have to come with a lot of calories?" she said. "We have to do something with our pets that causes them to lose weight but doesn't take the joy out of the relationship."

Just like for people, diets need to reduce calories, but not nutrients. And just like for people, it's not easy.

"You'll be surprised how precise the science is on this," Ward said. "We can manipulate [protein levels](#), fat levels, carbohydrate levels, fiber and add supplements. There are a lot of sophisticated tricks that your veterinarian has available to help."

Ward advocates what he calls "parallel solutions" that will benefit both man and man's best friend.

"Many of these things are things you should be considering for yourself as well," he said. "If you modify how often you walk your dog, you'll both gain additional benefits. If we raise awareness of how we're feeding our dog or cat, maybe we'll be more mindful of our own eating practices."

The prize may be more years of companionship.

In a landmark study published in 2002, two groups of Labrador retrievers were tracked throughout their lives, with the group that ate less having a longer life span of nearly two years. More recently, a 2018 study of 12 common dog breeds found normal-weight dogs live five months to 2.5 years longer than their overweight counterparts.

"That's a lot more time with your pet if you keep them trim," Linder said.

Ward said the lack of progress in battling pet obesity is "disappointing," but he remains optimistic.

"When I started this 15 years ago it was kind of a joke," he said. "People said, 'Look at Garfield eating all that lasagna.'"

"But we've changed the language. More people see this as a serious threat, a disease that is robbing your pet of years of life and causing pain and suffering. I think people are taking this much more seriously now, and that gives me hope."

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