

Is Your Pooch Too Pudgy?

Half of the dogs and cats in this country are overweight, putting them at risk of joint pain, diabetes, and shortened life spans. Learn what workouts are best for your breed. >

BY MARGARET LITTMAN

Americans aren't the only ones whose waistlines are expanding—our pets are getting bigger too. “In twenty years I have watched pets get supersized in front of my eyes,” says Ernie Ward, DVM, a Calabash, NC, a veterinarian, author of *Chow Hounds: Why Our Dogs Are Getting Fatter*, and founder of the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP).

Just over half of all cats and dogs in US households are either overweight or obese, reports the APOP 2009 National Pet Obesity Awareness Day Study, and the reasons our pets are packing on the pounds aren't that different from the reasons their owners are. Just as we're eating larger portions and more snacks than a generation ago, so are our pets. Because

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our lives are busier, we're less likely to get the exercise we need—and less likely to take a long walk with our dogs or engage our cats with a ball of yarn.

It might seem that an extra pound or two on our four-legged companions isn't so terrible. But that little bit can be a significant percentage of a pet's total weight. For example, a Yorkie who tips the scales at “just” 12 pounds is equivalent to a 5-foot-4 woman who weighs 218 pounds.

Some owners disregard the health hazards associated with overweight pets and instead focus on how cute their plump cat or roly-poly puppy looks, says Nick Trout, DVM, a staff surgeon at Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston >

No More Fat Cats

Cats don't like to do anything they're not in the mood for—and exercise is no exception. Very few will tolerate being walked on a leash; if yours will, use a nylon harness instead, as cats can slip out of collars. The easiest way to get your kitty to move around is to strategically place her food and litter box in areas that require her to walk and climb.

Many toys are designed to engage a cat, but some owners also have success with a laser pointer or a feather tied to a broomstick. Play with your cat for 10 minutes a night to help her release energy and burn calories, suggests Louise Murray, DVM, DACVIM, vice president, ASPCA Bergh Memorial Animal Hospital in New York City.



MASTERFILE

Give Your Dog A Workout

When it comes to exercise, not all dogs are created equal: Historically, each breed was bred for different tasks, says Chicago dog trainer Lynn Brezina. This chart offers daily exercise ideas for a healthy dog; check with your vet before starting a new regimen.

CATEGORIES	BREED EXAMPLES	RECOMMENDED EXERCISES
Long-legged, short-nosed	Boxers, Chow Chows, mastiffs	Brisk walks. Do not take your dog out in extreme heat. Exercise for only about 20 to 30 minutes, to avoid overheating.
Large breeds in both height and girth	Great Danes, Bernese mountain dogs, greyhounds	Brisk walks. Joint-friendly walks of no longer than 30 minutes are better than hikes and lengthy running sessions.
Short-legged, short-nosed	Pugs, bulldogs, Boston terriers, Shih Tzus	Obstacle courses or walks (20–30 minutes). Create a fun, challenging hallway course with rolled-up towels and cardboard boxes.
Short-legged, with standard snout	Chihuahuas, Yorkshire terriers	Slow jogging for no more than 20 minutes (gradually add time and distance) or hide-and-seek. These dogs were bred to sniff out varmints, so grab a treat and hide it to keep your dog's brain active and legs moving.
Long-backed, short-legged, with long snout	Basset hounds, dachshunds	Brisk walks (of 20–30 minutes), hide-and-seek, or fetch. Toss the ball or stick close to the ground, where these dogs were bred to be. No leaping!
Long-legged, with standard snout and short hair	Pointers, Rhodesian Ridgebacks	Running. After 12 months of age, they can handle as much as 3 miles or 30 minutes at a time, depending on age and exercise history.
Water dogs	Labrador and golden retrievers, springer spaniels, poodles	Swimming (20–30 minutes). Choose a clean body of water where there's an easy way in and out (a gentle slope, steps, or a ramp).



ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

Dogs sweat by panting, but these short-snout breeds are **less efficient at cooling off**: Their mouths don't open as far, so it takes longer for air to pass over the tongue.

People often assume that all big dogs are high energy, but that's not necessarily the case. **Greyhounds are used to running sprints**, not marathons, and Great Danes are prone to hip problems.

Like the bigger smushed-faced breeds, these dogs are at risk of overheating. **Don't take your dog out in extreme heat**.

These dogs are high-energy, but while they may be able to run by your side, **their stride is much shorter than yours**. That means they'll expend more energy per mile than you—and therefore will tire more quickly.

Limit agility training for these dogs. Long-backed dogs are **prone to disk injuries**, and excess weight increases the risks.

As long as they're otherwise healthy, **these breeds can do anything**, from running to agility training.

These breeds were literally born to swim. But some water dogs will swim until they're exhausted—so you have to know when to call it quits. And never leave your dog in water unattended.

➤ and author of *Love Is the Best Medicine: What Two Dogs Taught One Veterinarian about Hope, Humility, and Everyday Miracles*. But overfeeding a fat cat or dog is basically loving it to death, says Dr. Trout. Overweight and obese pets not only have shorter life spans but also suffer from more medical problems during their lives, including back pain, arthritis, kidney disease, and diabetes—and they're more expensive to care for as a result.

Just as disturbing, says Dr. Ward, is that an inactive pet is more likely to become depressed or anxious. That's because a sedentary lifestyle leads to an alteration in the three major brain chemicals responsible for mood—and that can create emotional issues. "Aerobic activity for as little as twenty to thirty minutes a day balances norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin levels," he says, "resulting in a better, more stable mood." Also, well-exercised pets won't be quite as wired indoors, so they'll be less prone to chewing, barking, and other troublesome behaviors. ➤

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK ULRIKSEN; GETTY IMAGES

Pet Exercise Dos & Don'ts

DON'T be a weekend warrior. Exercising heavily on a Saturday after a whole week off can aggravate arthritis and cause joint injuries and sore muscles.

DO watch for warning signs of fatigue. Be alert to extreme panting, and check if your dog's ears are back from her face and her pupils are dilated.

DON'T use a retractable leash. If it doesn't retract quickly enough, your dog can accidentally become entangled with bikes, strollers, and other dogs.

DO let your dog walk and run on packed wet sand. It's easier on the joints and may cause fewer injuries than dry sand (for you *and* your pup!).

DON'T tie your pet to your bike. Even if the leash doesn't get snagged in the spokes, your pup will tire before you do.

how
to...

Start Your Furry Friend On A Diet

USE PORTION CONTROL

The serving size on a bag of kibble is formulated for active adult dogs and cats, says Ernie Ward, DVM. So if your 90-pound dog needs to lose 15 pounds, follow instructions for a 75-pound dog, suggests Barbara Royal, DVM, of the Royal Treatment Veterinary Center in Chicago. But cats become critically ill if they don't get enough food, so instead of restricting amounts, switch to a high-protein variety or one with fewer carbohydrates.

LIMIT HIGH-CALORIE SNACKS

Traditional pet treats are the canine or feline version of a Twinkie: high in sugar and carbs, low in protein. Look for high-protein treats that can be torn into small pieces. "You don't have to give your pet a huge dog biscuit to get him to sit," says Meredith Rettinger, DVM, a Los Angeles veterinarian working on Project: Pet Slim Down, a Purina Veterinary Diets Web reality series.

Prevention (ISSN 0032-8006) is published monthly by Rodale Inc. Vol. 63, Number 5. Office of publication is 33 E. Minor St., Emmaus, PA 18098-0099; (610) 967-5171. Copyright 2011 by Rodale Inc. Periodicals postage paid at Emmaus, PA, and at additional mailing offices. **Postmaster (US):** Send address changes to Prevention, PO Box 5886, Harlan, IA 51593-1386. **In Canada:** Postage paid at Gateway, Mississauga, Ontario. Canada Post Publication Mail Agreement Number 40063752. GST#R122988611. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: Prevention, 2930 14th Ave., Markham, Ontario L3R 5Z8. All rights reserved. Prevention is a registered trademark of Rodale Inc. Subscribers: If the postal authorities alert us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within 18 months. **Reader Preference Service:** We occasionally make our mailing list available to other companies whose products or services might interest you. If you prefer not to be included, write to Prevention Customer Service, PO Box 5886, Harlan, IA 51593-1386. Printed in the USA.