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ABOUT THE HOUSE | FEBRUARY 22, 2011

When Man's Best Friend Is Obese

Pets Are Getting Fatter; Owners Find It Tricky to Count Kitty Calories, Cut Kibble

By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS



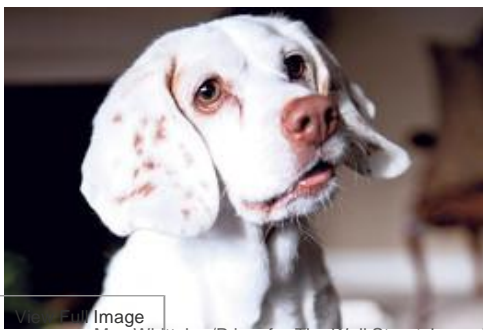
More than half of America's pets are obese, according to recent report. Kelsey Hubbard talks with the WSJ's Wendy Bounds about the growing epidemic and what people can do to pare down their pooch.



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Nunes family

Daisy Mae, a Folsom, Calif., beagle, weighed 41 pounds when she was adopted in 2009.



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Max Whittaker/Prime for The Wall Street Journal

For 12-year-old Buffy of Calabash, N.C., the trouble began with too much steak (and chicken and ice cream) at dinnertime. In nearby Ocean Isle Beach, six-year-old Hershey harbors a fondness for beef and cheese snacks. And 14-year-old Fridge of Longwood, Fla., gets cranky if his bowl isn't full.

Buffy, Hershey and Fridge are pets battling excess weight and obesity. As more Americans confront their own weight issues, furry housemates increasingly struggle alongside them. New data due out this week indicate the problem is reaching epidemic proportions, with more than half of U.S. dogs and cats now overweight or obese. Of pets considered to be "obese"—defined as 30% above normal weight—one-fifth of dogs and cats fit the bill, according to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, which conducted the survey with Mars Inc.'s Banfield Pet Hospital, the nation's largest general veterinary practice.

The main culprit: owners who routinely overfeed pets, don't exercise them enough and are unaware of the severe, and costly, health problems caused by excess weight. Common woes include diabetes, arthritis, kidney failure, high blood pressure and cancer. Research also suggests that pets fed less over their lifetime can live significantly longer.

Now, new efforts are afoot to stem what many vets believe is the single most preventable health crisis facing the country's 171 million-plus dog and cat pets. They include software for doctors to track a pet's "Body Condition Score," a blood test that could quickly determine animals' body-fat percentage, Weight Watchers-type pet diet plans and doggie treadmills.

"Obesity in pets is almost the equivalent of smoking in human medicine," says Steven Budsberg, director of clinical research at the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine. "There's the

A diet and exercise regimen has brought her down to 29 pounds.



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Max Whittaker/Prime for The Wall Street Journal

To keep a healthy weight, Folsom, Calif., beagle Daisy Mae gets walked three to four miles several days a week.

high cost to people, and it's self-induced. I never met a German shepherd who could open the refrigerator or food bag and pour himself another bowl."

In 2010, pet owners holding insurance policies with Veterinary Pet Insurance Co. shelled out \$25 million to vets for obesity-related conditions, such as ligament ruptures (about \$860 to treat), disc disease (\$649) and asthma (\$163). At Petplan USA in Philadelphia, five of the top insurance claims all have a close correlation to obesity.

When Cindy Nunes and her husband Joe of Folsom, Calif., adopted their beagle Daisy Mae, she was 41 pounds, suffered abdominal pains and couldn't roll over. Through a special high-protein and fiber, low-fat diet that's down to one cup a day, Daisy Mae has dropped to a more normal 29 pounds and walks three to four miles several days a week. Ms. Nunes estimates she's spent upwards of \$1,800 in the past two years treating Daisy Mae.

For years, the topic of "fat pets" was considered taboo in the veterinary community, says Ernie Ward, founder of the pet obesity association and author of "Chow Hounds: Why Our Dogs Are Getting Fatter." Says Dr. Ward: "There are sensitivities to an owner's own weight condition and to making them feel guilty for overfeeding their pet."

To encourage weight discussions, Banfield is rolling out software into its 770 hospitals that will require vets to give pets a Body Condition Score on a scale of 1 (too thin) to 5 (obese) during routine office visits. "The power is in the fact that it will spark an important conversation with the owner," says Denise Elliott, a Banfield veterinarian and nutritionist.



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Molly Dempsey for the Wall Street Journal

Eric Frew of Longwood Fla., lifts Fridge, who weighs 30 pounds, despite weight-management cat food.

One hurdle: people's idea of what constitutes a fat pet often differs from clinical reality. A study by Pfizer Inc.'s Animal Health business showed that 47% of veterinarians felt their canine patients were obese, while only 17% of dog owners agreed. For instance, a 90-pound female Labrador retriever is roughly equivalent to a 186-pound woman who is 5-foot, 4-inches tall—a human body-mass index that's considered obese, Dr. Ward says.

Similarly, he says, a fluffy, domestic short-haired cat weighing 15 pounds is comparable to a 254-pound man who is 5-foot-9. (Recommended weight range is eight to 10 pounds.)

Charles Dolcimascolo, owner of the 12-year-old cocker spaniel Buffy, routinely fed his dog table scraps until she ballooned to 42 pounds, double normal weight for the breed. "You couldn't tell if she was a dog or a pig because she's beige," Mr. Dolcimascolo, 72, says. "She'd get depressed if I didn't feed her."

But after Buffy became plagued by arthritis, Mr. Dolcimascolo, who says he struggles with his own weight, reduced Buffy's dry food back to 1½-cups a day, cut back on table scraps and made steamed vegetables the only snack. Recent weigh-in: 33 pounds.



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GoPet

The Tread Wheel by GoPet, left, comes in various

sizes, depending on the breed of the dog, and retails from \$375 to \$971.

Knowing how much to feed pets can be confusing. Many cat owners leave out full bowls of food for pets to graze, but feeding just 10 extra kibbles of a typical dry cat food could add up to one pound of weight

gain annually, says Dr. Ward.

Manufacturers aren't required to list caloric content on labels unless the product bills itself as low calorie, according to the Food and Drug Administration, which says there's now a proposal circulating to change that. Meantime, feeding directions are listed for the "most demanding" life stage for which the product is intended, such as reproduction. Subsequently, "feeding directions can overfeed by 25%," says Dr. Elliott of Banfield.

Getting owners to follow feeding guidelines can be hard. The owners of Hershey, a six-year-old Labrador retriever with joint problems, are trying to cut his 80 pounds to the mid-70s. His treats are broken into smaller pieces, and he now gets two measured cups of low-calorie food daily with a tablespoon of wet food. "Before, we were just dumping it in," says owner John Pannullo.

Top Dogs' Diet

See guidelines for **daily calories and recommended activity** for the top ten dog breeds.

And as with humans, vets say some animals are more genetically prone to obesity, meaning they may need fewer calories than similarly sized pets who are metabolically lean.

Heather Noelte and Eric Frew own Fridge, who weighed a hefty 25 pounds when they adopted him eight years ago. Since Fridge had come from a shelter, "we didn't feel a forced calorie-reduction regimen" was fair, Mr. Frew says.

His current diet consists of 2/3-cup dry food in the morning and a weight-management turkey-and-rice cat food in the evening. Even so, Fridge currently weighs 30 pounds and needs a ramp to get onto his parents' bed, and Ms. Noelte said they cut off the side of his litter box because his tummy scraped it climbing in.

Weighty Matters

How to tell if your pet is pudgy and what to do:

Is my pet portly?

Can you feel your pet's ribs easily? If you have to dig around, your animal is likely too heavy.

Look at the animal from the side—you should see a tucked abdomen. A hanging belly indicates excess fat. Cats whose bellies drag the floor are often called 'swishers.'

Look at the animal from above. You want to see a moderate tapered 'waistline,' not a broad, flat back.

Weight-loss tips

Calculate calories—check with your vet for proper amount. Food label recommendations may be too much for inactive, spayed or neutered pets. Calories for many food brands are listed at petobesityprevention.com.

Measure meals—don't just fill the bowl. Try small high-protein, low carbohydrate meals two to three times daily. Look for low-calorie, no-sugar treats or substitute vegetables and fruits, such as sliced carrots and apples for dogs, or salmon flakes for cats.

Exercise daily—for dogs, 20 to 30 minutes of brisk walking or play time is recommended. With cats, try several short bursts (five to 15 minutes)

Food makers are expanding their offerings to make cutting back easier. Last fall, Nestle Purina, for example, launched "Project: Pet Slim Down"—designed to help pets achieve 1% to 2% weekly weight loss. In January, Hill's Pet Nutrition Inc., maker of Science diet and Prescription Diet, introduced a line of weight-reduction food systems with meals and biscuits in pre-measured packets.

Exercise is another hurdle, especially when owners don't keep themselves fit. Larger breeds such as Labradors and German shepherds need 30 to 60 minutes of active play daily, vets say, or two to three miles of walking. Smaller breeds still require about 15 to 30 minutes of play, while cats benefit from short five- to 15-minute bursts of activity like chasing toys.

The pet industry is hungry to help pets shed pounds. Sales of specialty "DogTread" treadmills costing \$599 to \$999 have risen 200% since Ogden, Utah-based PetZen Products LLC began manufacturing them in 2007.

At the Morris Animal Inn pet resort in Morristown, N.J., 32 dogs participated in "Fido's Fit & Spaw Retreat" clinic this January, complete with swimming and dog yoga. And in April, Camp Bow Wow, a 125-location doggy day and night camp franchise will launch a "Furry Fitness Challenge" contest for owners and pets to lose weight

of activity chasing toys or a laser pointer. Hiding food will trigger a cat's natural hunting instinct. together.

Source: Association for Pet Obesity Prevention "It goes to the dynamic of people looking like their pets," says Heidi Ganahl, CEO of Camp Bow Wow. "If the owner is focused on health, then the pets will be, too."

—Anjali Athavaley contributed to this article.

Write to Gwendolyn Bounds at wendy.bounds@wsj.com

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