Pet Obesity:
Five Years On
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“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.”

Benjamin Franklin
Foreword

How far we’ve come since 2009

We love pets, and since the release of our first in-depth pet obesity report in 2009, PFMA has strived to use its position as leading trade body for the UK pet food industry to support pet professionals and encourage owners to stop overfeeding and under-exercising pets. Helping owners manage these known contributors to obesity will hopefully put a stop to killing with kindness, ensuring all pets live a happy and healthy life. As pet food manufacturers, we feel it is our duty to help.

A key finding from our report five years ago was pet owners’ lack of understanding around what constitutes a healthy size. We worked in partnership with our members, vets and pet charity organisations to create a range of tools, including Pet Size-O-Meters, to help owners maximise the wellbeing and life expectancy of their pets and get to grips with the weighty issue of obesity. Together with Britain’s network of re-homing charities and more recently vets, PFMA has circulated around 400,000 Pet Size-O-Meters to date.

Owners and vets have long recognised treating with unsuitable ‘human’ food and guesstimating portion sizes as key factors to correct. In May 2013, we launched Weigh in Wednesdays in locations across the country to bring the pet care sector together to promote the importance of good nutrition, responsible feeding and weight management to pet owners.

There is still work to be done

Five years on from our original report, we set out to conduct follow-up research to gauge how much the pet obesity needle has moved – would obesity still prove a pressing issue for the UK’s 24.5 million pets?

It is with some sadness that I report on the state of the matter today, with little improvement realised over the last five years. Three in four (77%) vets believe the pet obesity problem has worsened since 2009, while two in three (63%) owners feel more important problems face their pets – perhaps unaware of the life-limiting consequences obesity can have.

However, I am heartened to hear that 93% of pet owners say they would be concerned to discover that their pet is overweight. Owners are willing to take positive action and with the right guidance, they can. All the tools are in place for pet owners and pet care professionals to better pets’ lives together – now is the time to use them. We have spoken to owners rationally and now need to engage them emotionally – drawing on the powerful words of Benjamin Franklin – involving them in initiatives to achieve the positive change pets need.

New initiatives for 2014

To help spread the word about ideal pet weight, PFMA will launch a #GetPetsFit campaign in May this year. A host of pet experts are drawing the community of Teddington, London Borough of Richmond, together to change its pets’ fortunes – watch this space.

We are also calling for as many pet owners, professionals and communities as possible across the nation to join our mission to #GetPetsFit.

Armed with fresh knowledge and motivated by direct, active engagement, we hope Britain’s pet owners will begin to tackle pet obesity on a scale never before seen in the UK. By working in partnership with various pet care organisations, we are jump-starting the journey to ensuring our pets can enjoy the benefits of the same kind of healthy and happy existence we try to create for ourselves.

Michael Bellingham, Chief Executive of PFMA
Five years on, where is the UK on the issue of pet obesity?

While pet owners’ awareness of pet obesity has improved by 30% since 2009, this awareness is not leading to action, with most (77%) vets believing that pet obesity remains on the rise. Vets estimate that up to 45% of all pets they treat are overweight or obese, yet two in three (63%) pet owners believe their pet is the correct weight.²
Pet owners unaware loved ones are at risk

Despite pet obesity being a potentially life-limiting condition, it seems pet owners are unaware of the gravity of the issue, with most (63%) feeling more important problems face their pets. What’s more, only one in three (37%) know how to check their pet’s weight, a mere 9% carry out the recommended monthly weight check and almost a third (30%) never check their pet’s weight.

ONLY 37% OF PET OWNERS KNOW HOW TO CHECK THEIR PET’S WEIGHT

OVER A THIRD OF PET OWNERS USE ‘HUMAN’ FOOD TO TREAT, WHICH CAN BE TOO HIGH IN FAT AND SOMETIMES TOXIC

30% OF OWNERS NEVER CHECK THEIR PET’S WEIGHT

68% OF PET OWNERS DO NOT FOLLOW PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE WHEN DECIDING PORTION SIZE
It’s easy to want to express affection for a much-loved pet by rewarding them with tasty treats – findings show that nearly half (48%) of pet owners are treating pets more than twice a day. Over five years there has been a 28% increase in cat and dog owners feeding pets table leftovers. These acts of apparent kindness can put pets at risk – according to vets, treating with leftover food is a leading cause of pet weight gain (78% for dogs).  

Vets state that another problem is owners not following feeding guidelines, something cited as the single biggest contributor to weight gain for all pets (especially acute among cats, 72%, small furries, 60% and indoor birds, 28%). More ‘titbits’ should generally mean smaller main meals to compensate. Currently, two in three (68%) pet owners do not follow professional guidelines when deciding portion size, with 30% taking a cavalier approach relying purely on instinct. Owners view overfeeding and too little exercise (75% and 74% respectively) as joint contributors to pet obesity, yet nearly one in ten (8%) believe no exercise is necessary for their particular pet. As with humans, all pets need exercise and it is incredibly important to balance regular meals and treats with sufficient activity in order to maintain a healthy weight.
A need for action

“Misperception of pet body condition most certainly is a factor in pet obesity and one which needs to be recognised so that positive steps can be taken to ensure the number of overweight pets in the UK is reduced. Certainly the best way forward is continued education of pet owners.”

Dr Philippa Yam MRCVS, Senior Lecturer in Small Animal Science, University of Glasgow

“By far and away the biggest concern amongst veterinary surgeons in practice is overfeeding leading to obesity. This is primarily a problem of human behaviour and a mismatch between the amount of food and the amount of exercise. All pets should be fed a nutritionally balanced diet and kept to their normal body weight.”

Robin Hargreaves, President of the British Veterinary Association (BVA)

“We must continue pushing the pet health message until overweight pets are no longer considered the ‘norm’. We need to raise awareness of pet obesity to pave the way for positive action.”

Zara Boland BVSc BE MRCVS, Founder of VetVoice Ltd

“While I take Frank for regular walks, I do like to reward him with lots of tasty treats. I would definitely welcome some professional advice on how to keep him in shape.”

Jessica Pearson, dog owner from Walton-on-Thames
Many consider pets part of the family and in some cases, owners would rather buy a present for their pet than a close relative. Many owners are over-humanising pets, with one in three (36%) feeding pets ‘human’ food treats, nearly half (48%) feeding treats more than twice a day and around a quarter (23%) feeding pets table leftovers, unknowingly putting them at risk. Treating in this way means that important nutritional requirements are sometimes not met. In addition, the BVA’s Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) explains that ‘human’ food such as chocolate is one of the most common causes of poisoning in dogs, and can be toxic to cats, rabbits and rodents. Owners must find the sweet spot, expressing affection for their pet in a more responsible way, via training, verbal rewards and playtime.

To put this issue into perspective, the following diagram shows what the reality of overfeeding can look like.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

![Diagram](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 cookie</th>
<th>2 cookies</th>
<th>1 chunk of cheese</th>
<th>9 chunks of cheese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Based on a 10kg dog, a 4.5kg cat and an average-sized woman*
Pets are just like humans – both need a balanced diet that includes food with the right levels of nutrients.

75% of pet owners admit that overfeeding and giving titbits play a large part in pets piling on the pounds.

74% realise a lack of exercise can cause pets’ weight issues.

“It is true that overweight pets don’t get enough exercise. However I also feel that they have too many treats. Some people think that if they are feeding the obesity or low calorie diet to their pet, the odd treat here and there won’t count. I advise pet owners to keep a pet food diary so they can reflect on how many extras they are really giving.”

Donna Lewis, longstanding BVNA Council Member
Substituting food for love

The emotional bond

As popular wisdom puts it, a dog is ‘man’s best friend’. Pets are often regarded as part of the family and can provide many benefits to owners, from walking outdoors and making regular exercise more fun, to companionship and helping to reduce stress levels. Encouragingly, nearly one in three (31%) pet owners are providing up to an hour’s exercise a day – however, none are meeting the recommended four hours’ daily minimum for rabbits.

Feeding the right diet

The two main types of pet food are ‘complete’ and ‘complementary’.

Complete pet food contains all the nutrition pets need – it is suitable as a daily diet without any additional food.

Complementary pet food is designed to form only part of a pet’s diet – generally, it would not meet nutritional requirements if fed alone. Complementary food is usually referred to as a ‘prepared treat’ and should be fed to pets in moderation.

One of the best ways to achieve the correct balance of nutrients is to feed according to ‘life stage’, feeding a different diet according to whether pets are babies, adults or seniors.
Follow the recommended feeding guidelines. Remember that they are guides and you may need to adjust feeding amounts depending on your pet’s lifestyle.

Be aware of how much you are feeding your pet as a family. Run a rota system to keep an eye on portions and ensure treats are not doubled up.

“Pet breeders, trainers, charities, behaviourists and dog walkers must ensure their clients understand that treats are not supplementary but form part of the pet’s daily food intake. If exercise is reduced then food intake should, in turn, be compensated. Everyone in the pet industry must work together to resolve this issue.”

Jacky MacKenzie, Founder of Teddington-based pet care company Paws for Thought.
Let’s get moving!

Diet isn’t the only factor that can determine a pet’s weight – exercise also plays a vital role. Vets currently view lack of exercise as a significant contributor to pet weight gain. As per the diagram to the right, cats (particularly indoor cats) should have at least forty minutes of playtime daily and roughly, adult dogs need at least an hour. Vets are best placed to give advice and guidance on this as for example some dogs may need longer, more vigorous walks.

Daily recommended exercise (approximate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pets</th>
<th>Amount of Exercise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cats</td>
<td>4 x 10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs</td>
<td>2 x 30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabbits</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Exercise plays a very important role in weight reduction, and it also improves general health. Dog walking will not only help your pet but will help improve your fitness too. Research shows that walking a dog helps reduce stress as well as helping you to keep fit.”

John Foster MRCVS, Chairman of the Pet Health Council

*NB. These figures are approximate only – the amount of exercise pets need will vary according to age, breed and health.
The true cost of pet obesity

There is nothing ‘cuddly’ about an obese pet.

Neglecting to feed and exercise pets to optimum levels can knock off up to two years of active life. Overweight pets, like humans, can suffer from a myriad of related health problems. Obesity causes animals discomfort and illness that can result in both emotional distress and financial pressure for owners – just a 20% increase in body weight can contribute to conditions such as diabetes, osteoarthritis and cardiovascular and respiratory disease.

Pet obesity is far easier to prevent than treat, so there is every reason to act now.

**ARTHRITIS**

Arthritis or ‘joint wear and tear’ can be a significant cause of pain and disability for pets.

Encouragingly, maintaining a normal weight is proven to reduce occurrence of arthritis even in pets genetically predisposed to this condition. In fact, just 7-8% weight loss for arthritic obese pets can result in a dramatic improvement in mobility.

**DIABETES**

Diabetes is a major issue for overweight pets – particularly cats and dogs, with around one in 500 developing the condition.

It is best to take action to improve pet health before any of the symptoms of diabetes set in, as this condition is irreversible.

**HEART DISEASE**

Overweight pets are at increased risk of developing high resting heart rates, high blood pressure and heart disease, which can in turn lead to heart failure.

Weight loss is proven to dramatically reduce the risk of heart disease and even completely reverse some of its effects.
Financial pressure

The majority of pet owners are aware of fixed costs associated with pet ownership — such as annual vet check-ups and vaccinations — and are somewhat prepared for the cost of occasional accidents.

What many may not realise is that significant additional bills can occur from medical emergencies and treatments linked to overfeeding and unsuitable treating — treating pets with inappropriate food costs owners around £215 million a year.27 Also, with an increase in obesity-related claims over the past few years, some pet insurers are considering cutting pay-outs for obese pets, just as the industry has done in the case of human health insurance.28 Certain pet insurers already include clauses stating pets not in a ‘normal healthy state’ at the initial time of cover cannot later claim for related injury or illness.29

To keep things simple, pet weight should be well-managed from the outset. Additional bills like these are widely preventable when pets’ optimum weight is maintained.
The solution

Back to basics

A core solution to the issue of pet obesity is owner education. Most (93%) owners say they would be concerned to discover that their pet is overweight, indicating that they are ready and willing to take positive action. It has never been easier to better pet health. Owners can receive counsel about pet weight concerns from qualified UK vets or vet nurses and currently 78% of Britain’s vets run obesity clinics. More information, tools and guidance can be found at www.pfma.org.uk – PFMA encourages all pet owners to use its Pet Size-O-Meters to check their pet’s weight is in line with guidelines.

Help is at hand

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Please note

There are some cases where the natural shape of a dog may mean this simple system doesn’t translate as easily. For example, Whippets and Greyhounds tend to have lean physiques while a Staffie will have a broader shape. A Bichon Frisé will have a nice fluffy coat for you to contend with. If you need help using the tool, download a hard copy version and take it to your local vet or pet care professional for advice.
### Cat Size-O-Meter

#### Size-O-Meter Score:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Very Thin</td>
<td>More than 20% below ideal body weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ribs, spine, and hip bones are easily seen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pronounced waist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Obvious loss of muscle mass with little belly fat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Thin</td>
<td>Between 10-20% below ideal body weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ribs, spine, and hip bones are easily seen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Obvious waist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Very little belly fat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>Ideal body weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ribs, spine, and hip bones are hard to feel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No defined waist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A small amount of belly fat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Overweight</td>
<td>10-15% above ideal body weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ribs, spine, and hip bones are hard to feel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Slightly sagging belly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Obese</td>
<td>More than 15% above ideal body weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ribs, spine, and hip bones extremely difficult to feel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Heavy fat pads on lower back and an obvious sagging belly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ribs, spine, and hip bones extremely difficult to feel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No waist can be seen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Heavy fat pads on lower back and an obvious sagging belly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Please Note**

- There is some reason to think that a cat's natural shape at rest may mean that this simple system doesn't translate as easily as you might expect. For example, if your cat has a long coat it may be difficult to judge the shape. There are also some breeds with body shapes, such as Maine Coon, that are generally lighter than the average moggie - however, they should still have the same body shape. If you need help using the tool, download a hard copy version and take it to your local vet or pet care professional for advice.

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- Your pet is a healthy weight.
- Seek advice about your pet's weight.
- Seek advice as your pet could be at risk.


**www.pfma.org.uk**
# Rabbit Size-O-Meter

## Size-O-Meter Score:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Characteristics:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1     | **Very Thin**  
More than 20% below ideal body weight |
| 2     | **Thin**       
Between 10-20% below ideal body weight |
| 3     | **Ideal**   |
| 4     | **Overweight**  
10-15% above ideal body weight |
| 5     | **Obese**  
More than 15% above ideal body weight |

## Characteristics:

- **Very Thin**
  - Hip bones, ribs and spine are very sharp to the touch
  - Loss of muscle and little fat cover
  - The rump area curves in

- **Thin**
  - Hip bones, ribs and spine are easily felt
  - Loss of muscle and very little fat cover
  - Rump area is flat

- **Ideal**
  - Hip bones and spine are rounded, not sharp – Ribs feel like a pocket full of pens!
  - No abdominal bulge
  - Rump area is flat

- **Overweight**
  - Pressure is needed to feel the ribs, spine and hip bones
  - Some fat layers
  - The rump is rounded

- **Obese**
  - Very hard to feel the spine and hip bones – Ribs can’t be felt
  - Tummy sags with obvious fat padding
  - Rump bulges out

---

Please note

Getting hands on is the key to this simple system. Whilst the pictures in the Rabbit Size-O-Meter will help judging whether your pet is the right weight purely by sight alone has its difficulties. A long coat can disguise ribs, hip bones, and the spine. While a short coat can make a rabbit’s appearance more triangular and highlight these areas. You will need to gently feel your pet which can be a pleasurable bonding experience for both of you!

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Please note

- Your pet is a healthy weight
- Seek advice about your pet’s weight
- Seek advice as your pet could be at risk

---

**Rabbit Size-O-Meter**

[Image: Rabbit Size-O-Meter.png]
How to check your bird's shape

- Getting hands on is key. Not all birds are used to being handled but it is essential to judge if your bird is in the right shape by sight.
- Use hands, not gloves, to handle birds as this allows you to judge if your bird is the right weight by sight. If you need to protect yourself — use a cloth or towel.
- Small birds can be held in one hand with the hand on the body and the leg bent. Use the gap between the fingers and muscle to see if the bird is too thin. The hand is then wrapped around the bird and neck. The bird is then wrapped around the grip to prevent it from flapping. Gently stroking the top of the head will help calm the bird.

- Gently run your fingertips down the centre of the front of the bird in the midline over the breast area. You should be able to feel a bony ridge (known as the keel or breast bone). This should be easy to feel but not too prominent.
- Next, run your fingers at right angles to the keel across the breast muscles. If these feel shrunken so that the keel sticks out prominently your bird is too thin. If the breast muscles are just rounded but you can still feel the keel your bird is in good condition. If you cannot feel the keel and the muscles are very rounded or you can feel or see fat moving underneath the skin your bird is overweight.

The breast muscle can also vary in size depending on how much exercise your bird gets. If your bird has larger, longer muscles than a bird that does not fly, then the breast muscles may be more prominent. If your bird flies a lot it may have larger breast muscles. If your bird eats a lot it may have larger breast muscles too. If your bird is not exercising, the breast muscle should feel rounded.

Your pet is a healthy weight
Seek advice about your pet's weight
Seek advice as your pet could be at risk

Produced with assistance and advice from Anna Meredith MRCVS
www.pfma.org.uk
This year PFMA launches its #GetPetsFit campaign, encouraging pet owners from across the UK to take matters into their own hands, joining the fight against pet obesity in their local communities. As part of the campaign, PFMA will roll out a pilot ‘fit camp for pets’ initiative launching in Teddington, London Borough of Richmond, a community that views its pets as central to day-to-day life. PFMA hopes the campaign will showcase to the rest of the nation how people can come together in order to improve the fortunes of their beloved pets.

Visit www.facebook.com/GetPetsFit to find out more about the campaign, and www.pfma.org.uk/weighinwednesday for tools to check if your pet falls within the ideal weight range and tips to maintain a sensible feeding and exercise routine.
Pet obesity continues to be a concern, with vets reporting that up to three quarters of all pets they see are over their ideal weight. Britain’s pet industry must unite in its attempt to raise awareness of this important issue and how it can be prevented. PFMA will continue to work with its members, vets and other pet-lovers across the UK in the drive to rid the nation of pet obesity. By supporting pet owners in providing pets with optimum nutrition and exercise to maintain ideal weight, we can make a big difference.
Tips for managing pet weight

1. Don’t guess
Check pet food package guidelines to determine how much you should be feeding. Contact the pet food manufacturer for more information, or speak to your local vet.

2. Remember guidelines are just that
You may need to tweak food and exercise routines according to an individual pet’s needs.

3. Weigh out your pet’s food at the start of each day
This total measured amount can then be divided into the appropriate number of meals to be fed throughout the day.

4. Treat responsibly
Prepared treats are best aligned to your pet’s needs. Remember to deduct them from the overall food allowance.

5. Don’t overfeed
Be aware of how much you are feeding your pet as a family. Run a rota system to keep an eye on portions and ensure treats are not doubled up.

6. Exercise your pet to suit its individual needs
The amount of exercise required will depend on a pet’s age, breed and health.

7. Use a Pet Size-O-Meter
Use PFMA’s Pet Size-O-Meter to help guide you toward your pet’s ideal weight.

8. Regularly monitor your pet’s weight
This will allow you to nip any worrying weight gain in the bud.

Download a free healthy pet starter kit from the PFMA website and take your pet to the vet for ‘Weigh in Wednesday’

For further information on how to prevent pet obesity visit:

www.pfma.org.uk
www.facebook.com/GetPetsFit
References

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