

Dietary Aspects of Weight Management in Cats and Dogs

Deborah E. Linder, DVM^{a,*}, Valerie J. Parker, DVM^b

KEYWORDS

- Obesity • Nutrition • Client communication • Macronutrients • Micronutrients
- Optimal nutrient profile

KEY POINTS

- The optimal weight loss diet is best informed by obtaining a full dietary history and performing a detailed assessment of the pet, pet owner, and environment in which the pet lives.
- Dietary selection is guided by macronutrient and micronutrient needs of each cat or dog.
- Adjusting the rate of weight loss and calorie restriction requires frequent follow-up, and owners should be prepared for multiple weigh-ins to adequately align expectations and timeframe for weight loss.
- An important component of successful weight management is the role that human–pet relationships can play in affecting obesity treatment and adherence to dietary management.
- Because weight management plans can be labor intensive, veterinarians can use pre-made resources, such as frequently asked question handouts on nutrition-related myths or owner-directed guides for selecting pet foods.

INTRODUCTION

Choice of an optimal weight loss diet for cats and dogs is informed by obtaining a diet history and performing a detailed assessment of the pet, pet owner, and environment in which the pet lives. Incorporating information about pet and pet owner preferences can allow for individualization of the weight management plan and has the potential to increase adherence. There is no single best diet for every overweight pet, but there are several factors, medical and nonmedical, that should be considered before making a

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^a Department of Clinical Sciences, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, 200 Westboro Road, North Grafton, MA 01536, USA; ^b Department of Veterinary Clinical Sciences, The Ohio State University, 601 Vernon L. Tharp Street, Columbus, OH 43210, USA

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Deborah.Linder@tufts.edu

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diet recommendation as part of a weight management plan that will be discussed. Macronutrient considerations, including protein, fat, and carbohydrate content as well as nutrient and calorie density should be incorporated. An important component of successful weight management is the role that human–pet relationships can play in affecting obesity treatment and adherence to the diet plan decided on by the veterinarian and owner together. This article guides the veterinary health care team to work with the client to develop an individualized and optimal diet management plan for healthy cats and dogs, with recommendations for when to seek additional help from a board-certified veterinary nutritionist.

INITIAL APPROACH TO SELECTING THE OPTIMAL DIET

A complete nutritional assessment (see [Eirmann L: Nutritional Assessment](#), in this issue) is the basis for choosing the most appropriate weight loss diet for cats and dogs. Incorporating information about pet and pet owner preferences can allow for individualization of the weight management plan and has the potential to increase adherence.

Pet Assessment

Every pet should undergo physical examination and nutritional assessment (see [Eirmann L: Nutritional Assessment](#), in this issue). Clinicopathologic data and medical diagnostic workup as indicated is useful to elucidate comorbidities that may influence diet selection. Body condition score and muscle condition score are crucial parts of every examination and may also impact diet selection.^{1–3} For example, a pet with severe muscle wasting has more specific protein needs, and one with a body condition score of 9 (9-point scale) may require severe, long-term calorie restriction, which warrants attention to nutrient density. Veterinarians should note that body condition score and muscle condition score may be discordant (ie, an obese pet could have severe muscle wasting).

Impact of Diet History

A complete diet history allows for an accurate estimate of calorie intake. For examples of published diet history forms (see [Eirmann L: Nutritional Assessment](#), in this issue).^{4,5} Many owners are unaware that supplements, treats, rawhides and dental chews provide calories, so these should be discussed. For example, more than half of pet owners administer medication in a food item⁶ and often do not recognize this part of the pet's diet without further questioning. In the authors' experience, pet owners commonly use high-calorie food items such as margarine or peanut butter to assist in administering medication. All owners should be counseled on recommended food items and portion for medication administration.

Obtaining information through a complete diet history may inform diet selection because of preferences of the pet owner. For example, some diet options may have nutrients or additives that would otherwise be given as supplements (eg, glucosamine for osteoarthritis, which is a common comorbidity with obesity). Eliminating additional supplements may simplify management and improve client adherence. Further, knowing that a pet owner has concerns about the pet's dental health allows for discussion of tooth brushing or selection of diets formulated to improve dental health (ie, with Veterinary Oral Health Council seal of acceptance; www.vohc.org), while removing incentive for owners to give treats or chews with dental health claims that may add unnecessary calories or unbalance the diet. Most importantly, obtaining a diet history allows for an

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