

Communicating with Pet Owners About Obesity

Roles of the Veterinary Health Care Team

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KEYWORDS

- Obesity • Weight management • Client communication • Transtheoretical model
- Stages of change • Veterinary health care team roles • Human animal bond

KEY POINTS

- Treating pet obesity continues to challenge veterinary health care professionals.
- Elements of a successful weight loss program include client commitment, an individualized treatment plan integrating the needs of the client, pet, and their environment, and a reassessment plan.
- Training and enlisting all members of the veterinary care team will improve the effectiveness of addressing pet obesity.
- Communication tools can be used to assess the client's ability to change and implement a weight loss plan at the right time in the right way to achieve better adherence and improve patient health.

INTRODUCTION

Obesity continues to be the most prevalent disease of dogs and cats, affecting up to half of the nation's pets.¹⁻⁵ Although it is well established that obesity negatively influences health, well-being, and even lifespan,³⁻⁶ veterinary professionals continue to struggle to educate and convince clients to begin or adhere to a weight loss program for their pets. Veterinarians may lack the leadership, communication training, or educational tools to effectively implement the team skills and protocols within their clinics^{7,8} to improve the standard of care of patients. This often creates a cultural identity crisis within the veterinary health care team and deployment of inconsistent medical and communication standards. In addition, lack of time, apprehensions about poor revenue, and concern over inadequate treatments are additional barriers to talking about pet

Dr J. Churchill serves on the Nestle Purina Advisory Council. Dr E. Ward has nothing to disclose.

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Vet Clin Small Anim ■ (2016) ■-■
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cvsm.2016.04.010>

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obesity with clients. Veterinary teams must present a consistent and unified group approach to effectively address pet obesity and overcome these challenges.

Many veterinarians are reluctant to tell a pet owner their animal is obese.⁹ Veterinarians fear this information will offend, upset, anger, or even lose a client. This imagined outcome leads to professional anxiety, apprehension, and avoidance.¹⁰ Veterinary team members prefer to ignore issues that make them uncomfortable. When veterinarians offer dietary recommendations, their medical advice is often disregarded or a patient fails to achieve the desired weight loss, leading to further discourage veterinary teams from confronting nutritional issues. Small animal obesity is a complex, challenging, and sensitive topic. It is a professional responsibility to address pet obesity as any other serious disease. Effective communication and treatment strategies must be designed to involve the staff and actively engage clients to successfully combat the pet obesity epidemic.

TEAM APPROACH TO NUTRITIONAL COUNSELING

Consistency is necessary for sustainable success in any endeavor. Veterinary teams need a clear, logical, and methodical approach to consistently and effectively counsel clients on a pet's diet, lifestyle, and quality of life. Nutritional counseling and weight loss recommendations should be integrated into routine vaccination visits, during puppy and kitten appointments, and during sick pet visits. Every veterinary team's goal should be to assess a patient's nutrition as the fifth vital sign in every examination, as proposed by the World Small Animal Veterinary Association.¹¹ Although the specific workflow and techniques may vary between clinics and practitioners, it is essential each veterinary team has an organized system or protocol for acquiring and delivering medical advice to clients. The nutritional counseling workflow should be based on a team's nutritional competency and dietary philosophy, individualized communication styles of team members and clientele, and infrastructure constraints, such as number of staff, examination rooms, length of appointments, and equipment.

Another important element to ensure nutritional counseling is successful is to assure that the health care team is open-minded, approachable, and empathetic. Many pet owners are reluctant to ask a veterinary health care professional for dietary advice. They may feel embarrassed, concerned their choices will be judged or labeled as a "bad pet parent," or they are unconvinced the veterinary team can help them. Clients may also view veterinary clinics as limited in resources or knowledge and only offer advice on the few products they sell. These concerns are legitimate doubts that the veterinary profession must address. Veterinary teams must be proactive on weight loss and nutritional counseling; clients may rarely broach the subject unprompted. Each team member must be trained to consistently communicate in a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental, and caring manner. Veterinarians must focus on actively listening to clients, being open-minded and flexible to individual pet owner's needs, and offering individualized support. Every team member has the opportunity to influence a pet owner's understanding of body condition, nutrition, and commitment to change. It is the responsibility of veterinarians and team leaders to create and maintain best practices for communications and treatments. Nutritional counseling is now a minimum standard of veterinary care and should be included in every patient interaction.

THE 3 ELEMENTS FOR WEIGHT LOSS SUCCESS

Clinical success in achieving and maintaining weight loss in pets is determined by 3 key factors: (1) owner commitment, (2) individualized weight loss program, (3) regular

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