

PET OBESITY WHY WEIGHT?

Increasing UK pet parents' awareness of the canine and feline obesity epidemic



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Are you doing everything you can to keep your pet at a healthy weight? Most pet parents say yes, absolutely. But the professionals (and the data) are telling another story.

While we already know that keeping pets at healthy weight can help them live longer, obesity is still one of the biggest preventable problems facing cats and dogs today. And UK pet parents, despite their best intentions, are often unwittingly complicit in the problem.

It's clear that pet parents face obstacles both recognising obesity and tackling it. We want to continue to break down these barriers, helping them prevent their pets from becoming overweight from a young age, as well as recognising excessive weight gain when it happens.

To do this, we've harnessed up-to-date survey data and key insights from pet health professionals to propose some immediate solutions for both pet owners and veterinarians on tackling the issue of pet obesity. And we've also looked to the future, considering how the trends of tomorrow could influence the fight against pet obesity in the long-term.



INTRO



Pet obesity is, ironically, an expanding problem.

A 2021 study by the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) found that 7% of dogs seen by vets in one year were recorded as overweight – that equates to one in fourteen. Their previous study from 2009-2013 indicated that just 6% were overweight, indicating that obesity is increasing as time goes on.^[1] And it's likely this figure is significantly under-representative as the study relied on the pet being noted as overweight in their medical records.

This is just one of the pieces of research on the pet obesity epidemic. Many studies have been produced by brilliant organisations about the psychology behind pet obesity and human behaviour, as well as pet owner understanding. These include:

- UK Pet Foods (formerly the PFMA) Annual Report
- Mintel Annual Report
- World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) + One Health Committee
- PAW Annual Wellbeing Report (PDSA)
- Royal Veterinary Colleges VetCompass Data on Obesity

These resources have not only helped us see the scale of the problem, but also understand key disconnects that lie behind it. We can see that pet owners may:

- a) Lack the knowledge to prevent weight gain
- b) Be unable to recognise the issue or understand why weight gain can be detrimental to their pets
- c) Struggle with the mental framework most successful for undergoing and achieving weight loss for their pet when appropriate

With a wealth of information out there, it's clear that a lack of awareness can't be entirely to blame. So what else is?

The goal of the ManyPets 2023 Why Weight? Report was to find out.

We put out two surveys – one for pet parents and one for veterinary professionals:

- a) To discover pet parents' approach to their cats' and dogs' diet and exercise – and their understanding of how these factors affect their pets' weight, health and happiness.
- b) To better understand the experiences of veterinary teams on the front line of the pet obesity crisis and discover what further help they need.

SURVEY

COMPLETED BY

2,476

Pet parents

398

Veterinary professionals

It also aimed to provide insight into what education is available on the topic of preventative health care for pets.



Animals remaining chronically overweight have been shown to have a reduced life-expectancy compared to the breed-average, sometimes by up to two and a half years.^[2]

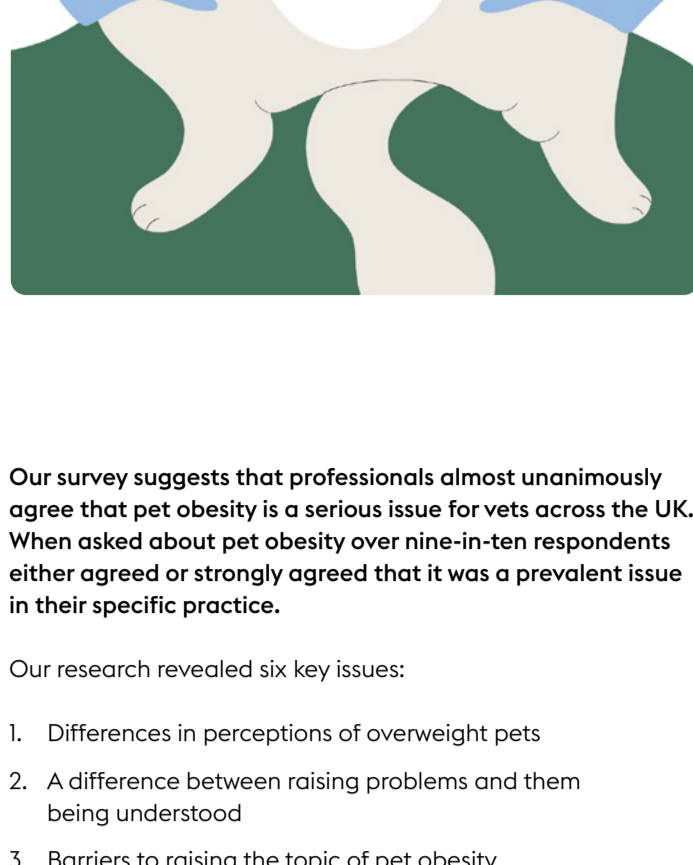
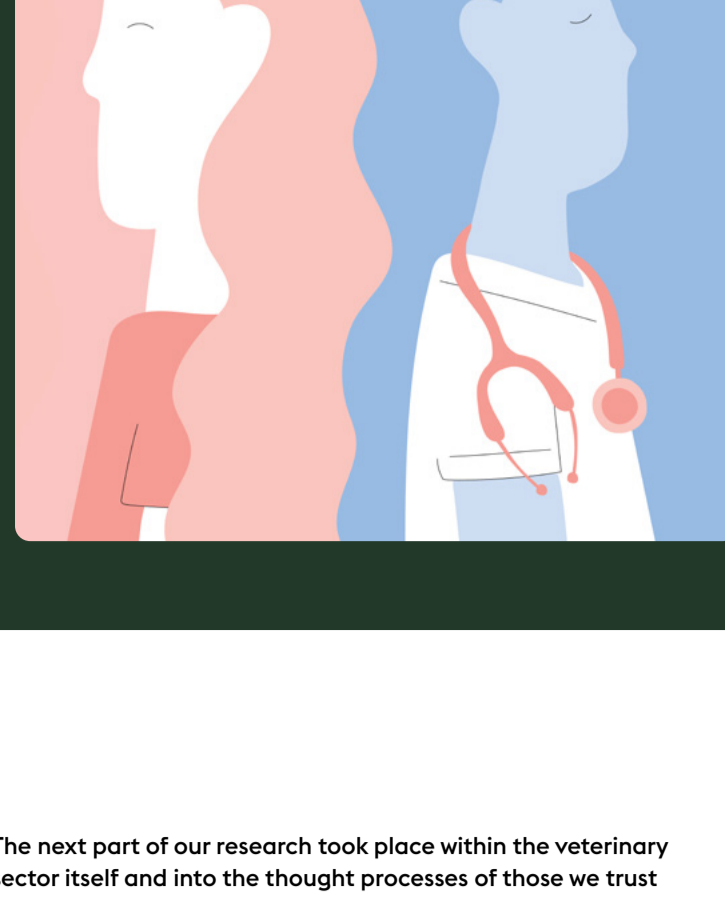
Obesity makes our cats' and dogs' lives shorter. So why wait to deal with it? We want pet parents to be able to better engage with the issue of pet weight at an earlier stage and, with the help of their veterinary team, take preventative action to stop it ever becoming a problem.

^[1] Frequency, breed predisposition and demographic risk factors for overweight status in dogs in the UK, C. Pegram, E. Raffan, E. White, et al. Journal of Small Animal Practice, March 2021

^[2] Effects of diet restriction on life span and age-related changes in dogs. Kealy RD, Lawler DF, Ballam JM, et al. J Am Vet Med Assoc. 2002;220(9):1315-1320

THE PERSPECTIVE

of veterinary professionals



The next part of our research took place within the veterinary sector itself and into the thought processes of those we trust to look after our pets.

We carried out a survey with 398 veterinary professionals (veterinarians and vet nurses) to gain insight into what trends veterinary professionals are seeing in the pets they examine.

We aimed to learn about:

- The scale of the pet obesity problem from a professional perspective
- How vets and pet owners communicate about pet weight issues
- The actions recommended by vets for dealing with pet weight issues
- The main causes of pet obesity and its impact on a pet's wider health
- How to improve support for pet parents with overweight pets

Our survey suggests that professionals almost unanimously agree that pet obesity is a serious issue for vets across the UK. When asked about pet obesity over nine-in-ten respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that it was a prevalent issue in their specific practice.

Our research revealed six key issues:

1. Differences in perceptions of overweight pets
2. A difference between raising problems and them being understood
3. Barriers to raising the topic of pet obesity
4. Insufficient training for veterinary professionals
5. Medical complications associated with weight gain in pets
6. Solutions for improving support to pet owners

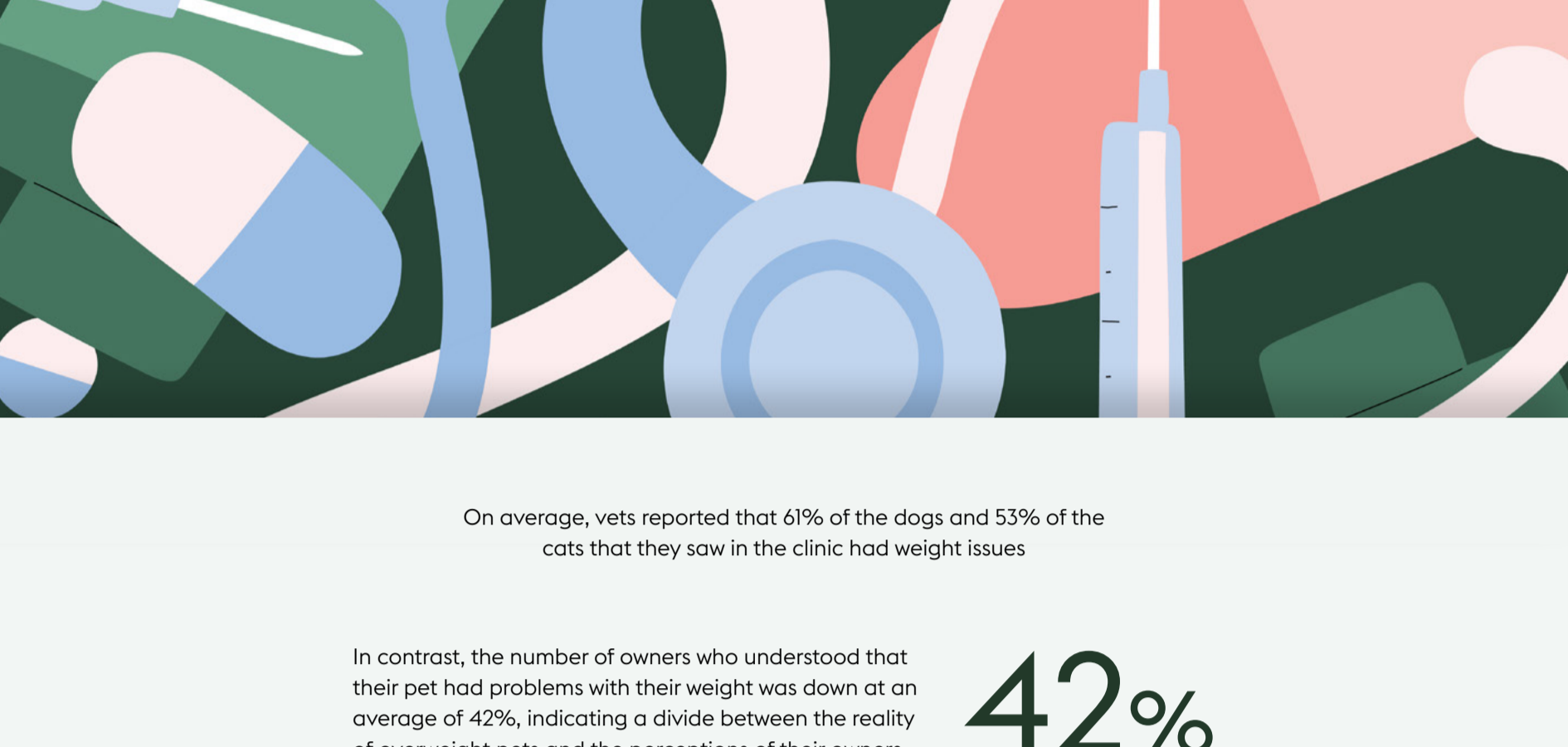


PERCEPTION DIFFERENCES IN THE PERCEPTION OF OVERWEIGHT PETS

The responses showed that veterinary professionals are seeing an increase in the number of overweight pets that they are treating, with the findings suggesting a serious upward trend:

85%

More than 85% of those surveyed said they were finding weight gain in pets to be an issue that they felt was increasing within their practice



On average, vets reported that 61% of the dogs and 53% of the cats that they saw in the clinic had weight issues

In contrast, the number of owners who understood that their pet had problems with their weight was down at an average of 42%, indicating a divide between the reality of overweight pets and the perceptions of their owners

42%

WHY THIS IS A PROBLEM

There's a stark contrast between the proportion of pet parents who recognise a weight problem in their pets and the number of vets who report weight issues for the cats and dogs in their care.

It suggests a level of oblivion in pet parents, who are either unwilling or unable to recognise that their pet has a weight problem, even when it's apparent to professionals.

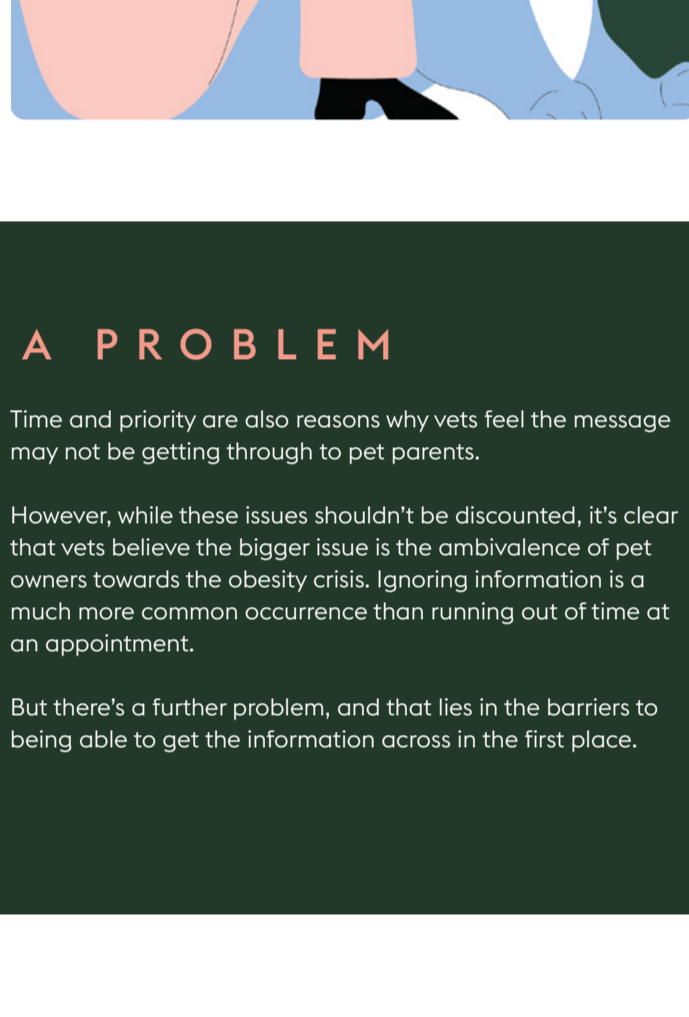
In many ways, clearer communication between veterinary professionals and pet owners could be the solution. Honest discussions are an obvious channel for bringing the issue of weight to the forefront. But unfortunately our research, in addition to that of others, has shown it's not always that simple.

RAISING THE WEIGHT ISSUE VERSUS BEING UNDERSTOOD

The divide between vet and pet owner perception is perpetuated further by issues in communication between the two sides.

Although almost all professionals surveyed stated that they would at times bring up the problem of pet obesity with owners, less than half answered that they would bring up the issues every time they came up. This was for a variety of reasons:

- Over 80% of veterinary professionals surveyed reported that pet parents didn't feel that the weight of their pet was an issue
- More than six-in-ten added that they'd brought the subject up before, but owners were reluctant to change
- Issues of time and priority were also raised, with nearly 30% of vets feeling that there were other important issues to address first in consultation, and over 25% adding that there simply wasn't enough time to address pet obesity



WHY THIS IS A PROBLEM

The majority of vets will raise the issue of pet obesity, but it's commonly observed that pet parents are reluctant to recognise the problem, or to make it a priority.

Arguably even more worrying are the 'repeat offenders.' Over half of the vets surveyed had been frustrated by relaying the correct information on the dangers of overweight pets to parents, only to find nothing was done about it.

Responses included concerns that "owners find excuses about their pet's diet or weight," and that "most of the time I feel the owners end up just saying they will work on it in order to end the conversation."

Time and priority are also reasons why vets feel the message may not be getting through to pet parents.

However, while these issues shouldn't be discounted, it's clear that vets believe the 'bigger' issue is the ambivalence of pet owners towards the obesity crisis. Ignoring information is a much more common occurrence than running out of time at an appointment.

But there's a further problem, and that lies in the barriers to being able to get the information across in the first place.

THE POWER OF 'CHONKY'

Barriers to raising the topic of pet obesity

Perhaps the most surprising reaction that was raised in the survey was that over 20% of vets felt nervous that bringing up the topic of overweight pets would result in a negative reaction from the owners of the pet.

There were an array of responses relating to this, from "the owners seem personally insulted," to "it's an emotive issue in humans and many owners consider it as not being relevant to health." Vets also remarked that they've had clients complain to the practice about raising the issue of pet obesity.

When questioned on why they think pet owners feel unsupported in dealing with the issues surrounding overweight pets, plenty of differing answers were given, but many similar themes arose.

The fact that solutions can be both time-consuming and challenging was amongst the top reasons listed, with a lack of time to address issues in their entirety during consultations and lack of follow-up checks also featuring heavily.

Further to this, in response to a question asking why pet parents do not take on recommendations from veterinary professionals, the responses focused heavily on a lack of owner engagement to suggestions.

Over 80% of vets said that owners didn't fully understand the impact that a pet being overweight would have on an animal's well-being, whilst more than two-in-three respondents observed that "pet parents felt they knew better".

CHONKY

WHY THIS IS A PROBLEM

Emotional or defensive reactions from pet parents in regard to a pet's weight issues is understandable, albeit problematic.

Hearing that a pet is not in a healthy condition will always be upsetting. It's also natural that some may feel a sense of personal or moral judgement over the matter – as is common in public debates concerning human obesity.

However, this perception is only getting in the way of tackling the problem. To confront the epidemic of pet obesity head on and improve the health of pets in the long-term, veterinary staff need to feel comfortable broaching these difficult topics with pet owners.

Encouraging pet owners to commit to solutions and helping them understand the true impact of obesity also requires engagement from both professionals and owners.

More time and priority must be given to dealing with the issues around pet obesity within consultations.

Equally, pet owners need to shift their own attitudes about how they take on the advice and information given to them regarding overweight pets from professionals in a more positive light; a chance to better the health of their pet.

"Careful, considerate, and collaborative communication is the key to effectively managing all aspects of maintaining and achieving a healthy weight," says veterinary nurse and pet weight management program leader Georgia Woods-Lee.

"Although at times it may feel daunting, as no one wants to cause offence, I believe there are successful ways to introduce the topic of weight and still maintain excellent client relationships".

KNOWLEDGE GAP

THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

Improving training for veterinary professionals

The professionals we surveyed believe that the education provided on the topic of pet obesity by their veterinary training is somewhat inadequate when dealing with the issues first hand.

Less than half of professionals surveyed agreed with the statement that their veterinary education prepared them with the knowledge that they felt was needed to tackle the pet weight epidemic.

Just 44% felt they had been adequately prepared to have conversations or make plans about an overweight pet with a client.

WHY THIS IS A PROBLEM

Clearly, with the rates of obesity in pets rising, this is an area that can be improved within the curriculum of veterinary education. The majority of professionals surveyed had self-trained in this regard, with the most common forms of this including CPD courses, articles and advice from colleagues.

Whilst this attitude to self-improvement is highly commendable, it further indicates a void in the training programmes set up to raise veterinary professionals to the standards that pet owners would expect.

Improvement in confidence around the topic would go a long way to making vets more comfortable addressing the issues surrounding overweight pets with their owners.

THE MEDICAL COMPLICATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH WEIGHT GAIN IN PETS

Another concerning issue caused by the growing pet obesity epidemic is the further health conditions it can lead to or exacerbate, severely damaging the long-term health of our pets.

Arthritis is the most common condition that vets link to overweight pets, with over 90% of the vets surveyed raising the condition as a major problem associated with excess weight.

Ranking third in the responses was cruciate ligament tears in the knees of dogs, which was brought up by one in every two vets surveyed.

More than half of respondents linked diabetes with being overweight, whilst feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD), cardiovascular and respiratory diseases were also linked by professionals to pets with weight issues.

"On a weekly basis, at minimum, I am seeing patients where being overweight has a significant impact on their condition, be that tracheal collapse in a ferret, regurgitation in a bulldog, or diabetes in a cat," says veterinary surgeon and specialist medic Hannah Darcy. "People's faces fall when I recommend weight loss as a major part of their treatment plan because they know how much harder it is to lose weight than gain it, particularly in a sick pet."

Vets concerns with overweight pets extended beyond diseases associated with obesity that are not limited to urethral blockage in overweight male cats with FLUTD or severe cases of diabetes causing an emergent state called ketoacidosis.

Treatments for these conditions are not just emotionally taxing for owners, but they can also be extremely costly over time.

WEIGHT GAIN

WHY THIS IS A PROBLEM

A chronic medical condition such as arthritis can begin a vicious cycle which can spiral quickly out of control. Symptoms of arthritis in dogs include reduced activity, limping and reluctance to walk, all of which can be a painful barrier for a dog that needs to lose weight.

While extra body weight does increase the stress upon a joint, almost more importantly, extra fat cells release increased levels of compounds called cytokines that increase inflammation. In these cytokines are a massive detriment to the health of the joint itself.

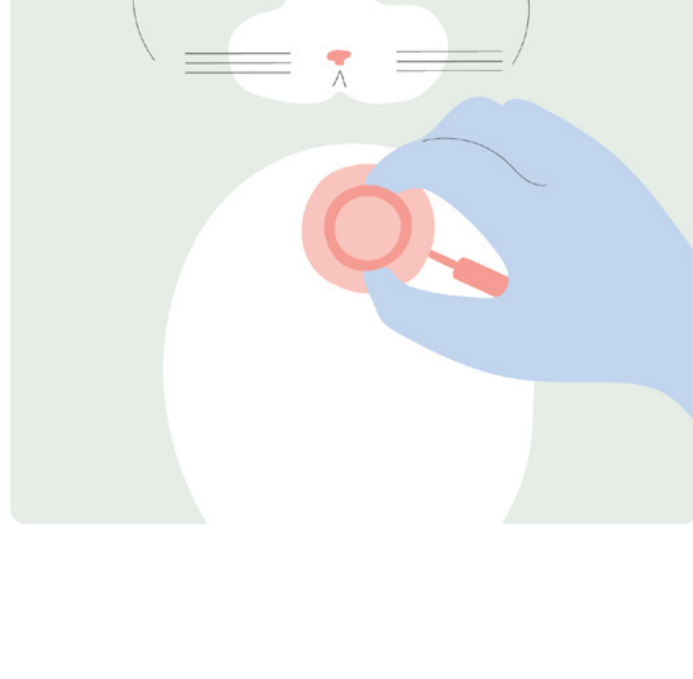
"Osteoarthritis is one of the biggest risks to all dogs as they age, but particularly those that are overweight. Weight loss has been shown to be the most effective 'treatment' option - sometimes better than painkillers with potential side effects, supplements and physical therapies.

If only all owners knew that reducing their pets' weight could give their dogs many more pain free years!" states veterinary surgeon, Dr. Caroline Taylor.

In some cases, conditions associated with obesity can be fatal to the pet, including but not limited to urethral blockage in overweight male cats with FLUTD or severe cases of diabetes causing an emergent state called ketoacidosis.

Treatments for these conditions are not just emotionally taxing for owners, but they can also be extremely costly over time.

SOLUTIONS FOR IMPROVING SUPPORT TO PET OWNERS



Vets have suggested a number of options for improving the level of support given to pet parents dealing with overweight pets.

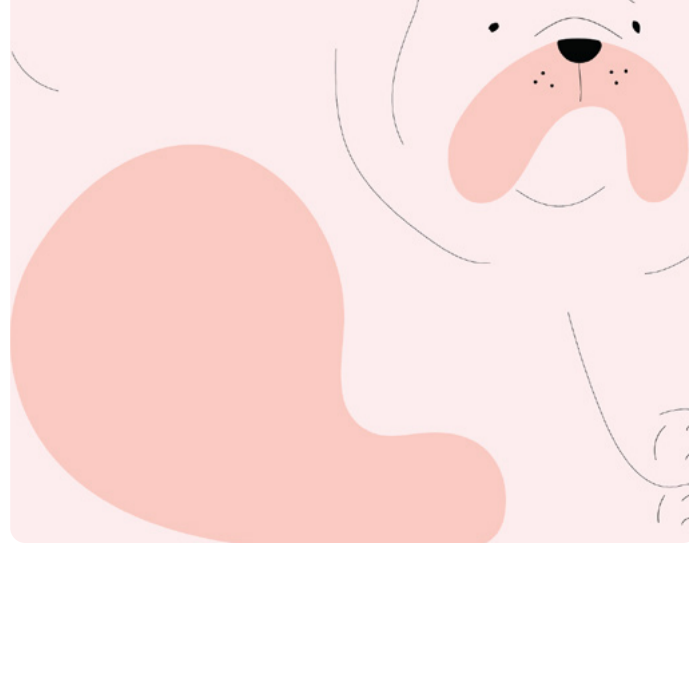
More than 70% of vets feel that obesity problems need to be brought up far earlier in a pet's life-cycle, whilst six-in-ten believed that better educating pet parents on the signs of weight gain would help reduce complications.

There were also calls for changes within clinics. More than half of vets surveyed called for more weigh-ins to take place and for conversations about pet weight to be integrated into more appointment types.

Only 20% of vets feel that they don't currently have the tools within the profession to beat pet obesity. This would suggest that with the right solutions in place, this is an issue that can be dealt with immediately using the resources already available.

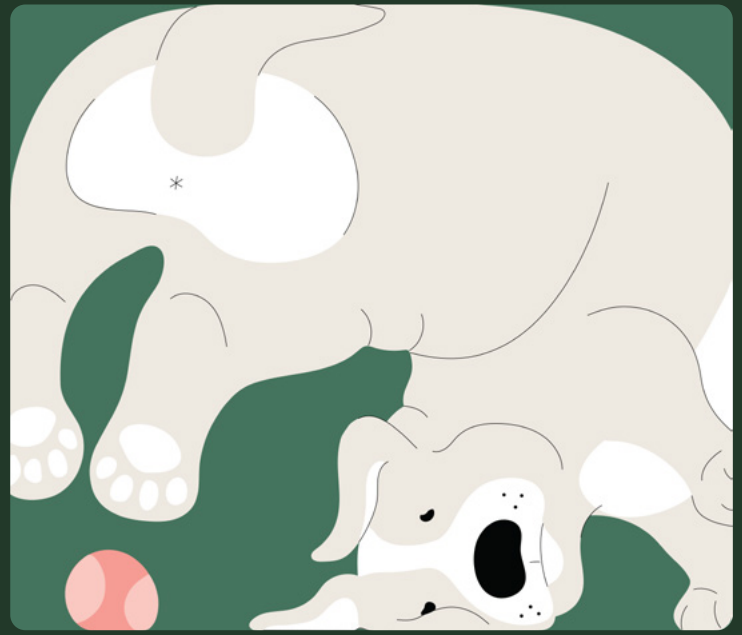
And whilst a majority of vets felt that the veterinary industry, including charities, schools and health bodies, were actively supportive in the fight against pet obesity, it's interesting to note that less than a quarter thought that insurers, pet food companies and pet health companies were doing the same.

Ultimately, the survey results show that tackling the crisis in pet obesity has to come from all fronts, with everybody pulling in the same direction. Vets feel that the tools to address the issues are already there, but communication, responsibility, effort and support all need to be refined to shift the outlook to a positive one.



THE COST OF PET OBESITY

vet bills and pet insurance claims



Letting our cats and dogs become overweight can carry a hefty penalty – both financially and in terms of their quality of life. We wanted to include consideration of the potential costs of diseases impacted by excessive weight as the next piece to our report.

Just like with humans, animals with too much excess weight are likely to have shorter lifespans. They can be more at risk of developing certain diseases and at the very least, many conditions can be worsened by concurrent obesity.

With access to a massive database of pet insurance claims, we looked at some of the biggest obesity-linked health problems for cats and dogs:

1. Osteoarthritis (arthritis)
2. Diabetes mellitus (diabetes)
3. Cruciate ligament disease/ruptures (dogs only)
4. Lower urinary tract disease (cats only)
5. Brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome/BOAS (dogs only)

These represent a huge cost burden to pet owners and the pet insurance industry, impacting claims paid each year.

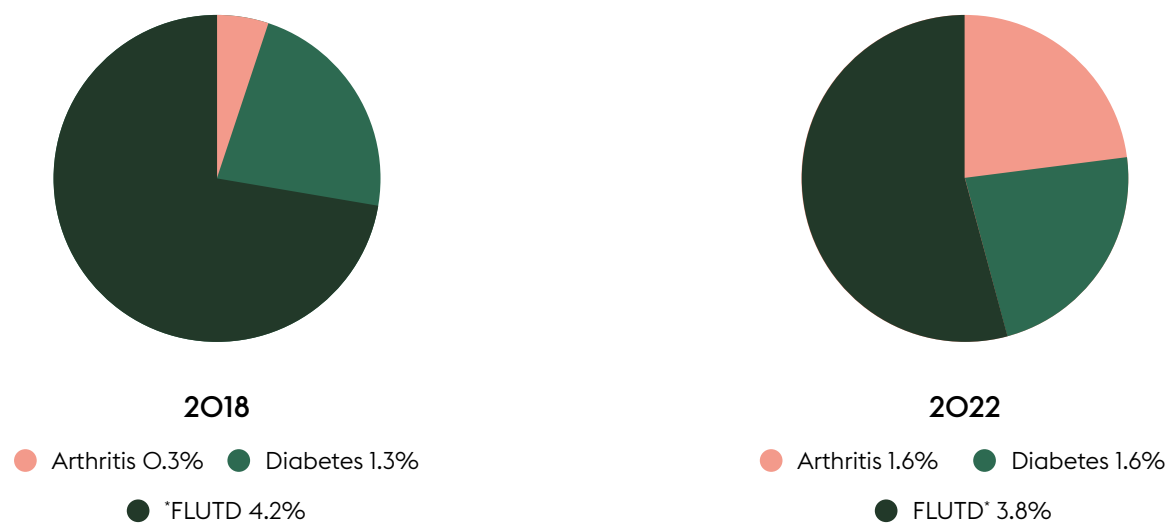
- The average cost of a dog diabetes claim was £369.13 in 2022 (£313.52 for cats)
- The average cost of an dog arthritis claim was £311.72 in 2022 (£164.89 for cats)
- Costs for addressing a cruciate ligament injury in dogs jumped from £1,152.02 on average in 2018, to £1,578.28 in 2022
- Costs for addressing episodes of feline lower urinary tract disease including cystitis and urethral obstruction increased from £384.13 on average in 2018 to £752.06 in 2022

Interestingly, the percentage of total annual claims closed from 2018 and 2022 has increased for both arthritis and diabetes, while percentage of total annual claims closed for cruciate disease and FLUTD have declined slightly. This is likely multifactorial, however there's no doubt the overall number of claims for obesity linked conditions has increased noticeably over the last four years.

It continues to be a worry amongst pet health professionals and pet owners that pets who are overweight or obese may result in higher claim costs and claim frequency.

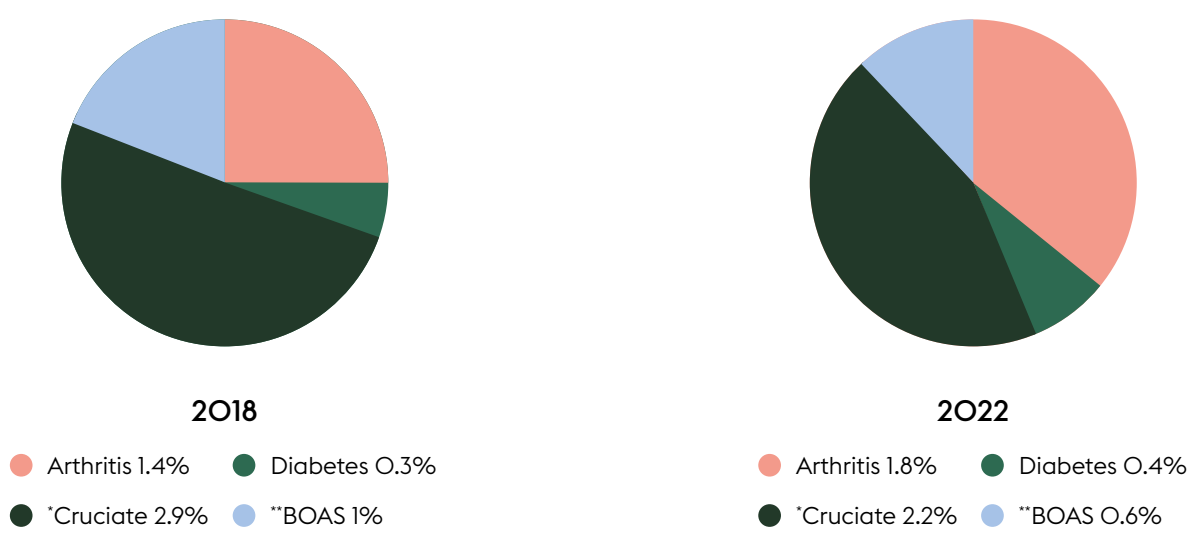
These pets can also result in higher day-to-day costs for pet parents, as they can require larger doses of medications and are being fed larger volumes of food.

PERCENTAGE OF ANNUAL CLAIMS for obesity related conditions - Cats



*FLUTD (feline lower urinary tract disease i.e. idiopathic cystitis, urolithiasis, urethral obstruction, etc.)

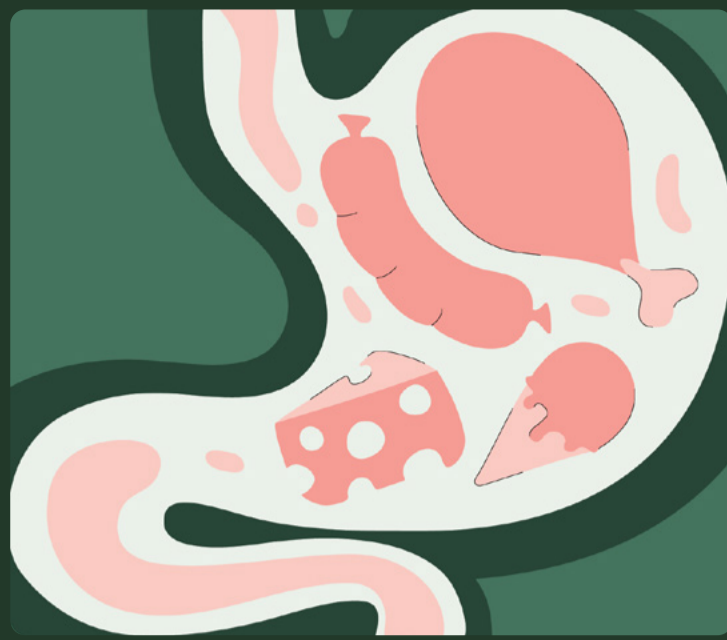
PERCENTAGE OF ANNUAL CLAIMS for obesity related conditions - Dogs



*Cruciate ligament disease/rupture
 ** BOAS (brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome)

KEY FINDINGS

the problem areas

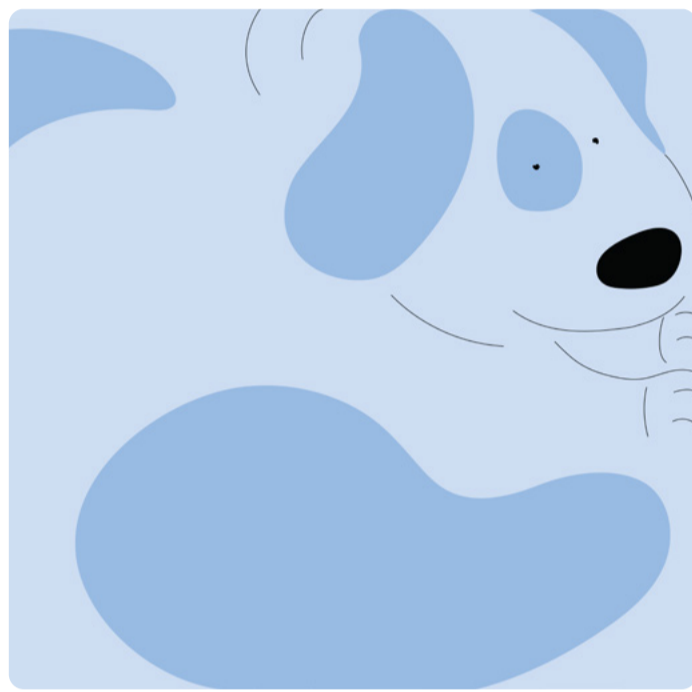


Using the data we collected, along with current resources on pet obesity, we were able to pick out key problem areas that could help determine what comes next.

Four themes kept coming up time and time again, giving us a clearer idea of what is impeding progress against the growing problem of pet weight gain.

THINGS WE ALREADY KNOW MEDICAL TOUCHPOINTS

Our data reiterated a number of known factors within the pet health community about obesity regarding a few health conditions and a pets' lifestyle.



Neutering impacts weight

TLDR - neutering can have an impact on weight gain - 33% of veterinary professionals say it is one major possible contributor to weight gain.

A minority of pet parents suspected that neutering has played a part in their pet's weight gain, with only 16% of dog owners and 12% of cat owners stating that having their pet castrated or spayed had caused them to gain weight.

Of those, 29% said the resulting weight loss journey was 'a bit up and down' - indicating how difficult it can be for owners to get their pet back to a healthy weight easily after their post-neuter weight gain.

This correlates with expert opinion. 33% of veterinary professionals indicated that post-neutering was a common timeframe for a pet to gain weight.

Neutering is recommended by veterinary professionals in most pets for a number of health reasons and is a decision that should be made between each pet owner and their vet. However, it's clear that the majority of owners are not aware that having their pet neutered can put them at an increased risk of becoming overweight and calories fed may need adjusting as such.

Studies suggest this association with weight gain after surgery is because of an impact on their hormones and metabolism, but primarily, an increase in appetite.

Health conditions and obesity

TLDR - the correlation between obesity and the impact it has on a pet's health is clear - with most people also knowing that generally pet health conditions don't cause weight gain.

We can see from the veterinary data that there are several pet diseases exacerbated by pet weight gain - including arthritis, diabetes, cruciate ligament tears, and feline lower urinary tract disease.

However, when it comes to whether health conditions cause obesity itself, the data was clearer - 7% of pet parents blamed a health condition for their pet's weight gain.



Two diseases that we see in dogs that may result in weight gain are hypothyroidism and hyperadrenocorticism (Cushing's disease)," explains Dr. Ronngren. "While it's important to rule these diseases out in a dog with suggestive symptoms, they are not often the culprit of a pet's weight gain."

This aligns with what veterinary professionals understand and what research has continued to support - that while occasionally underlying disease is to blame, weight gain in pets is most commonly caused by overfeeding.

PET LIFESTYLE

Mealtimes feed the beast (of obesity)

TLDR - pet parents and vets agree overfeeding is a problem, but there's still work to do. Only 63% of owners actually knew for certain the recommended amount of food to feed their pet.

Both cat and dog owners admit that overfeeding was the main cause of their pet's weight gain, with 36% of dog owners and 51% of cat owners giving this reason.

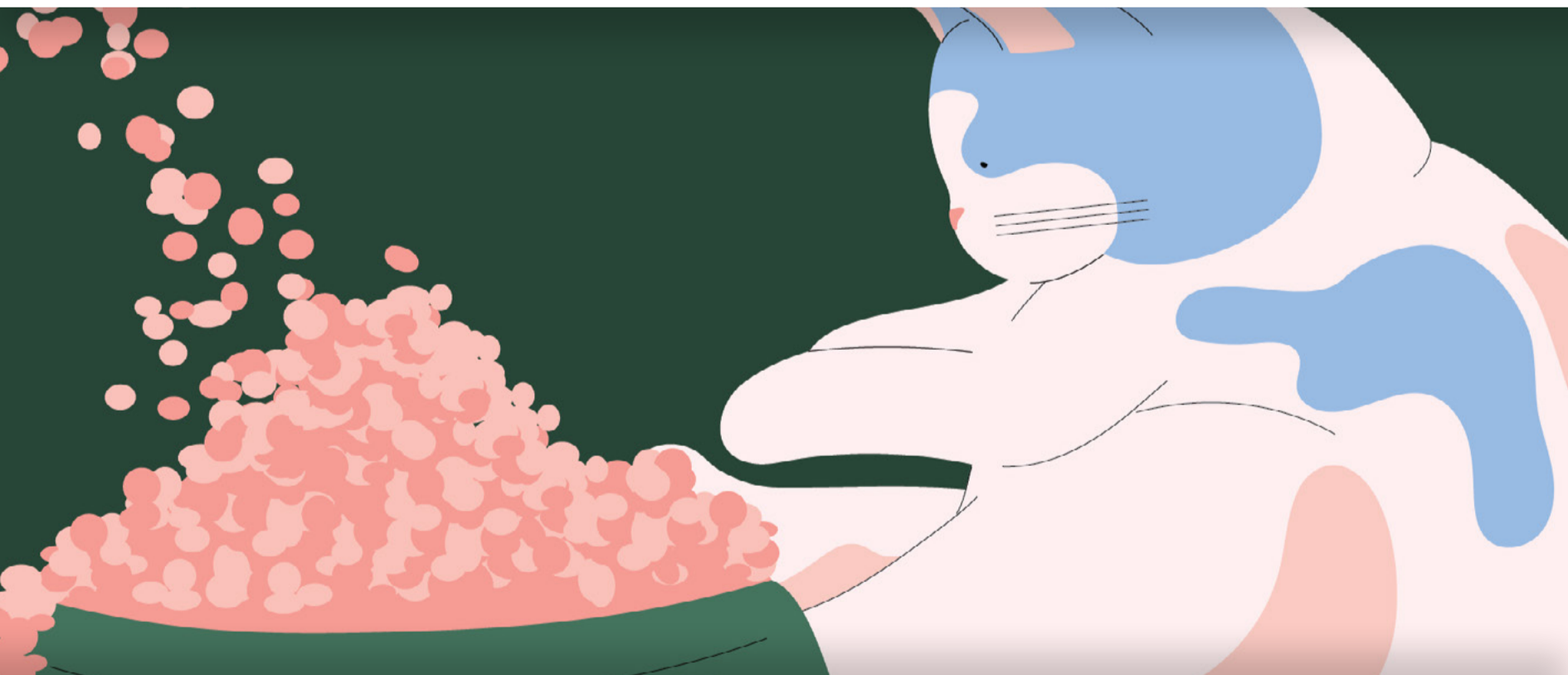
Dog owners also said that treats played a major part. It was the second most common reason they gave for their pet's weight gain, while for cat owners it was lack of exercise. Again, this is backed up by veterinary professionals, with 65% saying that excessive feeding was to blame.

Exercise

TLDR - kitty owners might need to actively think about how to incorporate exercise in to their pet's routine to stave off weight gain.

When we surveyed veterinary professionals, 41% of them said that lack of exercise was a leading factor behind pet weight gain.

This echoes data we saw earlier - that whilst 98% of dog owners said they exercise their pets, just 46% of cat parents actively exercised their kitty.



COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

One of the clearest messages we saw throughout the report was a disconnect between pet parents and veterinary teams.

We've seen that owners of overweight pets often educate themselves on how to handle it (43%) versus seeking the help from their clinic (39%).

Perhaps this explains why veterinary professionals have faced some kind of resistance when bringing up the topic of weight with clients - with over 80% of veterinary professionals surveyed reporting that pet parents didn't feel that the weight of their pet was an issue.

It also explains why 67% of vets said that they believe 'pet parents think they know better' than them on the topic of weight - with around one-in-ten suggesting that the reason pet parents might not look to the clinic for support is due to a lack of trust.

However, it's important to note that just 44% felt they had been adequately prepared to have conversations or make plans about an overweight pet with a client - showing there's work to be done to help veterinary teams in their mission to tackle the problem.

"For veterinary professionals, it's clear they often see the same missteps being made repeatedly. Owners may not understand the importance of setting good habits early on, including weighing food, choosing the right food, how to choose healthy treats and how often to give them, how often they should be checking their pets weight, and being more concerned about a pet that seems too thin vs. too heavy. All of these are touch points of education for vet teams that can help make a pet parents journey with weight a more positive one."

Georgia Woods-Lee, BSc (Hons) RYN CertCFVHNut (Nutrition)

MOVING FORWARD

a proposed action plan for pets

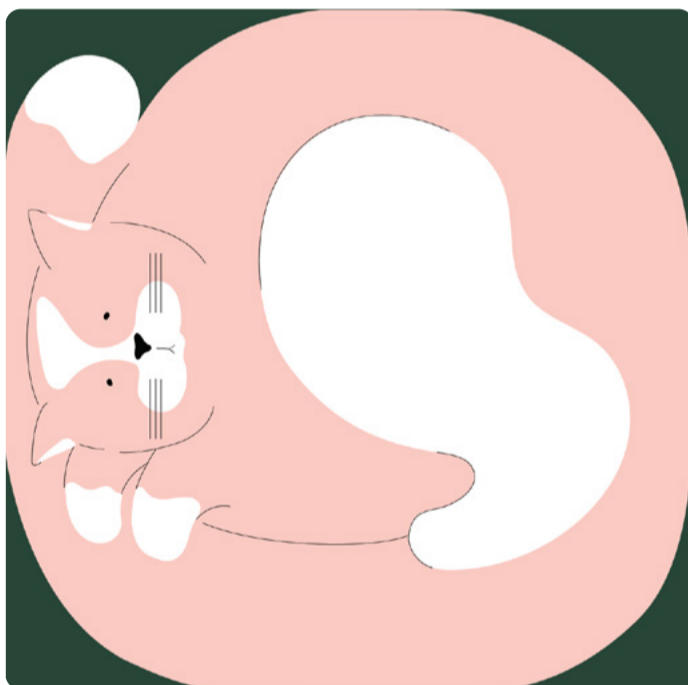


Taking what we know from our research and the survey data, we believe that the best area to invest time and resource is in the prevention of pet obesity at those crucial early stages. We know the tools are already in place — it's just a matter of using them more effectively.

We presented our findings to a panel of pet health professionals who have a variety of vast experience working with pet parents on matters of weight.

Together, they reviewed the data and discussed what they thought needed to change to positively impact the number of obese pets in the UK.

They came up with four key objectives.



1. Starting healthy, staying healthy: integrate the topic of weight from birth

Begin discussing pet weight management early in a pet's life journey, such as during wellness plans, insurance policies, early routine procedures like neutering, or adoption from breeders or shelters. Engage pet parents when they are most receptive, setting a foundation and motivation for lifelong healthy pet weight.

Conversation Starters:

- How can we make the introduction of weight management a positive and exciting part of the pet ownership journey, just like vaccines or parasite prevention?
- What tools and resources can be provided to new pet parents to support healthy weight habits from the start?
- Should there be incentives or rewards for pet parents who maintain their pets at a healthy weight from an early age?

2. Little by little: make weight discussions routine

Implement technology-driven nudges for veterinary professionals to regularly record pet weights and body condition scores. Encourage pet parents to note their pets' weights regularly throughout in their pet's life, especially at the neutering stage, and help them proactively manage their pets' weight.

Conversation Starters:

- What are effective ways to incorporate pet weight discussions into routine veterinary visits? Can clinic systems require a weight and BCS to be entered before a physical exam or appointment notes can be saved/completed?
- How can technology, like apps or reminders, make it easier to understand the health impacts of their pet's weight and help them track their pet's weight and health at home?
- Should there be a rewards system or recognition for pet parents who consistently monitor their pet's weight and keep it within ideal range?

4. Tech that works together: integration of pet weight tools

Unify various pet weight management tools, such as apps, weight checkers, and educational resources, into one seamless ecosystem that fits into pet owners' daily lives. Promote engagement and accountability by making these tools more accessible and user-friendly.

Conversation Starters:

- What are the most effective ways to integrate pet weight management tools into pet parents' everyday routines? Can use these to encourage more regular involvement from them at home?
- How can technology streamline data collection and sharing between pet owners and veterinary professionals?
- Should there be a universal platform that consolidates pet weight information from various sources for easy access and monitoring? Could this prompt owners to make adjustments when their pets body condition changes?

3. Championing veterinary teams: strengthening the toolkit

Streamline and consolidate available resources for veterinary teams to create a comprehensive, and cohesive weight management program. Develop effective communication plans to motivate veterinary professionals to prioritise weight management as a fundamental aspect of pet healthcare.

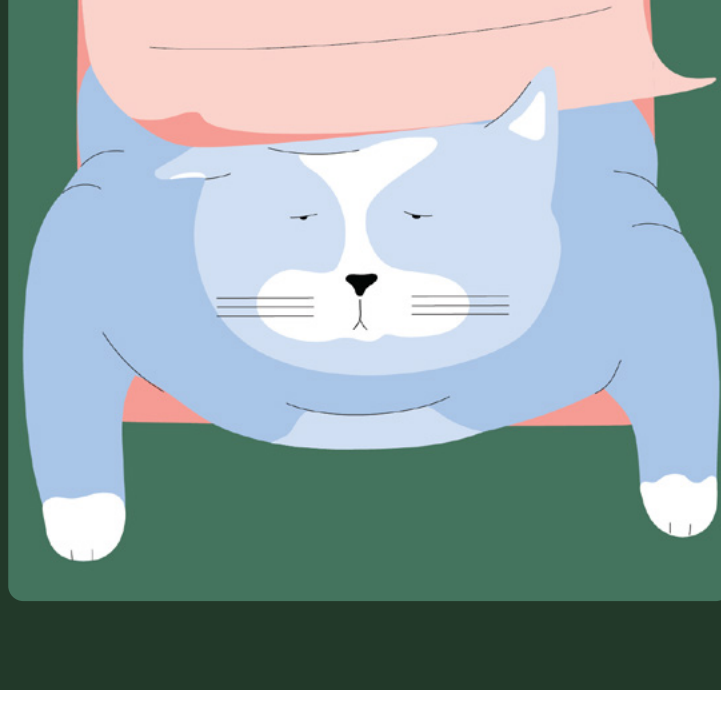
Conversation Starters:

- What resources are currently available to veterinary teams, and how can we centralise and enhance these tools for better impact? Can we bring this early on to veterinary students about to head into practice to build confidence in addressing pet weight?
- How can we ensure that weight management and education on food portions becomes an integral part of every veterinary practice's protocol?
- How can we create an "all in one toolkit" that is easy to access, fast, and effective for vet teams? How can we make this more readily accessible for teams?



FUTUROLOGIST THEORIES

and predictions



With key recommendations for immediate change fetched from the professionals, next we looked ahead. We wanted to know how the trends of tomorrow could influence the fight against pet obesity in the long-term.

We spoke with Applied Futurologist, Tom Cheesewright, who revealed what the future of pet health could look like. From a pet metaverse to communal pet care facilities, here he shines a light on trend-led scenarios that could exacerbate or ameliorate the problem of pet obesity.



Just like their owners, the health of pets is affected by many different factors, said Tom.

Most often when looking at the future, I find the greatest moments of change when those factors combine. So for this exercise looking at the future of pet health, I have used the Intersections method to map existing, measurable pressures on pet health against incoming trends that might amplify them. This leads us to a few possible scenarios in the years ahead that might exacerbate - or ameliorate - the problem of pet obesity.



Metapets

Humans are spending more and more time in the virtual world, especially for exercise. Systems like Peloton and Zwift already allow us to exercise in groups, or get the sense of exercising in some of the world's great landscapes. With the advent of the metaverse, we are likely to spend even more time augmenting our exercise regimes with technology: running alongside marathon greats or playing games with people from around the world.

If we don't find a way to include our pets in this world, their needs for exercise - and companionship - might get neglected. So what is the answer?

Do we have pet friendly Pelotons designed with health and safety regulations in mind for our four legged friends? And would that really satisfy their exercise needs? You can't put a VR headset on a dog and treadmills can be dangerous for them, so how else might we bring them into our digital world?

The metaverse allows us to mix the real world with the digital, so what we might see is future exercise games that include our pets, creating a space for humans and pets to enjoy exercising together. A run around the park with your dog could become a race to escape a horde of invading aliens together. Your metaverse headset can identify your dog and show you the aliens running away from Rover as he scampers across the grass.



Communal Facilities

Part of the challenge of pet obesity is a lack of space for them to run around, and time for us to take them out. As we increasingly live in more densely populated cities - a future reality with rising property costs and the need to lower our carbon footprints - we will need to find new ways to keep our pets fit and happy.

One solution might be shared facilities for our pets. Or even more shared pets. Modern Build to Rent developments already have shared gyms, dining, and work areas. So in the future, why not a shared pet facility on site?

Imagine a combination veterinary practice, boarding kennel and exercise yard. The central courtyard in a rectangular apartment block could be turned over to animals, with a reconfigurable exercise yard to keep them engaged and challenged, and a couple of different zones to separate them out: not all cats and dogs get along! Residents in the scheme could leave their animals in the care of trained professionals in the day and take them out in the evening. Or pay into a scheme to spend some time with shared 'block pets', who would always have plenty of opportunities for exercise with subscribers taking them out for walks in the morning, evening, or at weekends.

Decamping to the Country

If your bigger pet is getting overweight through lack of exercise, then a change of location might be the only choice - particularly for larger breeds. Pets play an increasingly important role in many of our lives. To the point where their health may become a deciding factor in where we choose to live. If the apartment block won't cut it, perhaps we choose to decamp to the country to keep our pets fit.

The phenomenon of 'city flight' has largely been seen as an option for the privileged, decamping to the coast to take advantage of the space and fresh air, now that we're not bound to the office so much. But there are many beautiful parts of the UK that are not as expensive and offer a wonderful quality of life for us - and our animals. If our pets are the priority then maybe that's where we look...

Housebuilders and property developers might take advantage of this desire and start to build more pet-friendly country homes. Small, but with the next must-have feature: a Pet Room. Somewhere on the ground floor that your pet can call their own, with secured access to the outside world, and plenty of comfort and indoor entertainment (though we know that even future cats will never sleep in a bed you buy for them).

If we can't move to such a place permanently, we might see such options as popular rentals. A month in the countryside like the sanatoriums of old, with recommended walks, a nutritionist on hand, and daily weigh-ins in the pet room.



Flexitarian Pets

Exercise is a huge component of our pets' health but we can't ignore diet as well. There are many things we might do in the future to improve our pets' diets, ensuring they get the nutrition they need while reducing levels of obesity. And we might also look at the carbon footprint of the pet food chain.

Pet nutritionists and weight loss clubs might be niche now but could become a mainstream part of our pet care routine - pet owners across the UK could find themselves taking their four legged friends to the 'pawstive pounds control' weight loss club without a second thought. However, with these regular check-ins we'll be able to minimise the need to visit the vet with weight related issues and concerns.

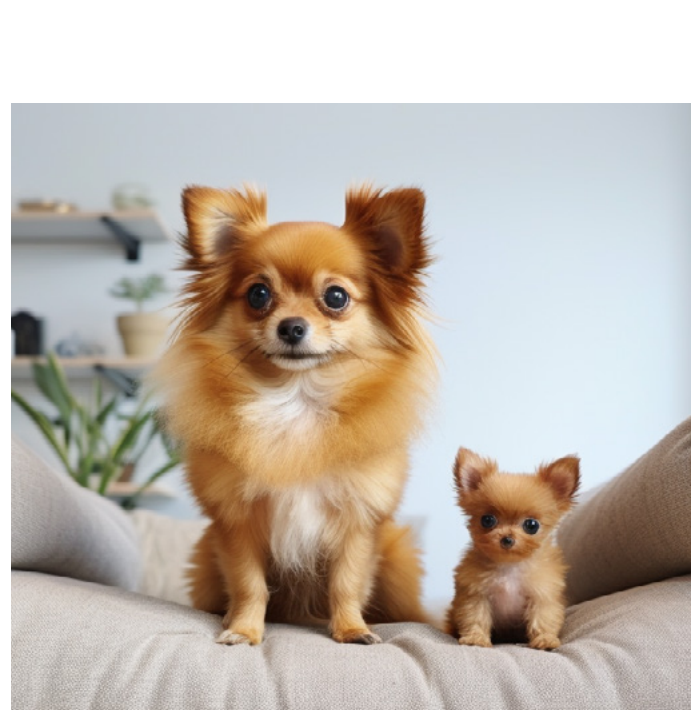
Part of their recommendation might be to look at foods based on alternative sources of protein: fish and insect proteins are already on the market, providing an alternative nutrition option with a much lower carbon footprint. Lab grown meats might be a future low-carbon alternative that still offers the nutrients they need, though the price will have to fall: right now they would be an expensive way to feed a pet. But the future could see engineered foods become a cheaper and more nutritious alternative - if they can meet the necessary nutrient profiles for our pets.

Honey, I shrunk the dog

As a general rule, big dogs need more exercise and more food. That can make it tricky to meet their exercise needs, and expensive to give them a diet of the required volume and ideal quality. If we want to reduce pet obesity, we might want to look at reducing the size of pets overall - or rather, choosing breeds with lower food and exercise requirements.

Fashion may have created the recent trend for smaller dogs, but it might be other pressures that grow and extend it. New homes are generally smaller than in the past. Inflation has made feeding pets challenging and may force us to compromise on quality. And busy lifestyles make it tricky to take the daily long walks a larger dog will need to meet their exercise needs.

This might mean more people in the future picking a King Charles Spaniel or Yorkshire Terrier and fewer going for a Labrador or Golden Retriever - the shift might even mean we see some of our most loved breeds disappear from our cities in years to come, with new smaller breeds to dominate. Larger breeds may even become extinct in hundreds of years to come, if people continue to choose smaller alternatives.



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