The Growing Problem of Overweight Pets

As veterinary professionals, we have tools to assess a pet’s weight status—and know the risks extra pounds can pose to their health and wellbeing. It can be much harder, however, for pet owners to recognize when their pet is overweight, especially as “heavy” is increasingly considered the “new normal.”

Rachel Beck is a certified veterinary technician and credentialed project manager on the Veterinary Affairs team at Banfield Pet Hospital. She currently leads a team of project managers who specialize in implementation. Having been in the veterinary field for over 16 years, she has served roles both in hospitals and at Banfield’s central office. She is passionate about engaging the whole veterinary team in proactive health and wellness as well as career pathing for paraprofessionals in the industry. She resides in Portland, Oregon, with her significant other and one cat.
Given the ongoing pet obesity epidemic in the United States, Banfield Pet Hospital and the North American Veterinary Community (NAVC) partnered for the fourth year to produce the Veterinary Emerging Topics (VET) Report, combining the power of data to understand pet health trends and identify opportunities to improve patient outcomes.

Our 2019 VET Report focused on trends and opportunities in osteoarthritis (OA) management, a multi-modal approach that includes not only pain but also nutrition and weight management. As we explored barriers veterinary teams face in diagnosing and treating excess body weight and OA, we recognized that the complexity of these linked conditions merited continued exploration this year. The 2020 report continues the mobility theme, this time focusing primarily on excess weight in pets.

The veterinary and pet care industries need to continue efforts to address this growing issue in partnership with pet owners, especially because current approaches have not effectively slowed (much less reversed) the upward trend in proportion of overweight pets.

In addition to examining its veterinary medical records, Banfield conducted a random survey of the owners of overweight adult dog population. Key findings included:

- Of the more than 1.9 million adult dogs seen at Banfield in 2018, 51% were classified as overweight.
- Of those, less than 10% successfully lost weight following an overweight diagnosis, regardless of age.
- Of the limited number of pets that do lose weight, roughly 40% regain weight and their overweight status within 12 months.
- Overweight prevalence increases with breed size, but smaller breeds topped the list of most affected breeds.
- Smaller dogs were more successful at losing weight, but within each breed size category, there was variation by breed.

**PARTNERING WITH OUR MOST IMPORTANT ALLIES**

**THE OVERWEIGHT STATE OF PETS**

Our 2020 VET Report dives into findings about overweight adult dogs and the factors that appear to be affecting owner engagement and successful weight loss.

This year, we partnered with Mars Petcare’s Kinship Data Science and Analytics team to use new techniques with the goal of better understanding our overweight adult dog population. Key findings included:

- Of the more than 1.9 million adult dogs seen at Banfield in 2018, 51% were classified as overweight.
- Of those, less than 10% successfully lost weight following an overweight diagnosis, regardless of age.
- Of the limited number of pets that do lose weight, roughly 40% regain weight and their overweight status within 12 months.
- Overweight prevalence increases with breed size, but smaller breeds topped the list of most affected breeds.
- Smaller dogs were more successful at losing weight, but within each breed size category, there was variation by breed.

**HOW OWNER ENGAGEMENT AFFECTS WEIGHT LOSS SUCCESS**

In recent years, the number of overweight adult dogs seen at Banfield has increased. Efforts to help pet owners address this issue have evolved from one-on-one consultations with veterinarians to work with clients over the course of the entire treatment plan.

**MEET: Bernie, a terrier mix adopted from a local rescue weighing 10.8 pounds.**

- Bernie is highly food motivated. Food and treats played a big role in building the new pet-owner relationship.
- His right hind leg had previously been amputated.
- He was under treatment for dermatologic and gastrointestinal issues (alopecia, hyperpigmentation, vomiting). He later developed wheezing and bacterial pyoderma.

In 9 months, Bernie weighed 14 pounds and was deemed overweight.

**CHALLENGE:** He was on a hypoallergenic diet.

**ADVICE:** Gradually increasing his daily activity levels.

**COMPROMISE:** Using blueberries and carrots as treats, given the importance of food in the pet-owner relationship.

What engaged the owner and kept her motivated?

- His owner felt that his veterinarian knew and understood her and her relationship with Bernie.
- His owner understood the importance of weight in both her and Bernie’s health.
- His owner was focused on helping Bernie to live a healthy life, and this was more important than showing love through food.

**CHALLENGE:** It was hard for his owner to not give him any treats or chews, which he previously loved.

**SUCCESS:** In 8 months, Bernie weighed 7.6 pounds, where he has remained. What started as small 10-minute walks grew to hikes together in the Pacific Northwest!
overweight dogs to better understand how pet weight-management recommendations were received and adopted—and found the following factors were associated with successful weight loss:

- Multiple dogs in the house
- Ability to consistently measure feeding amount
- Use of pet care services, such as a pet walker

Leveraging the results of a survey of Banfield veterinarians and credentialed veterinary technicians, it was also identified that pet owner education and engagement throughout the weight loss process is an important step veterinary professionals can take to help overweight pets get the care they deserve—and ideally, reverse current trends (BOX 1).

In doing so, veterinary professionals can promote weight loss and maintenance of a healthy weight, thereby reducing the risks of developing associated chronic conditions like OA. Weight loss and subsequent weight maintenance are important components of managing OA, as reducing excess weight and fat may reduce clinical signs of OA and improve a pet’s comfort, mobility, and quality of life.

PUTTING OUR FINDINGS TO USE IN PRACTICE

While there may be barriers to successful weight loss and maintenance, Banfield has outlined several areas of opportunity for veterinary professionals in the 2020 VET Report. It is important to develop stronger partnerships with pet owners to improve their commitment to their pet’s proper weight, helping them understand its importance to overall health, activity, mobility, comfort, and quality of life.

Specifically, here are 3 opportunities for the veterinary team and the pet owner to improve the management of overweight pet cases:

1. **Incorporate a complete nutritional assessment into every veterinary visit.** This enables early guidance on nutrition and may increase an owner’s ability to provide a diet history, facilitate discussion about healthy body weight, and identify increasing body weight trends sooner. Utilizing a standardized template with questions for the veterinary technician to ask the client can help ensure that all calories ingested by the pet are documented.

2. **Create a customized weight loss plan.** There is no one-size-fits-all approach to pet weight loss. Each plan should be tailored to each pet and owner. A target of a healthy weight—as well as improved quality of life, mobility, activity, and comfort—should all be considered and incorporated into individualized weight management plans.

3. **Position pet weight loss as a team effort.** Arm the entire hospital team with consistent messaging to keep clients engaged and committed to the weight loss (or maintenance) plan. This includes accurate weights during check-in, educating clients on the dangers of excess weight, recommending a specific diet, discussing portion size, recommending weight-loss activities appropriate for the pet, and following up with the client throughout the pet’s weight-loss journey to provide encouragement and support.

It is important to remember that actions taken to approach the excess weight issue are not easy and may not be immediately successful—but hang in there! As you plan and implement your hospital team’s approach to managing pets, keep the Five Domains of Quality (Safe, Effective, Timely, Efficient, Pet/Client-Centered) in mind (BOX 2). We introduced the domains in Banfield’s 2019 VET Report, and they are modeled after the Institute of Medicine’s Six Domains of Health Care Quality. Additionally, incorporate a continuous improvement process, such as the PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) cycle, to ensure that your approach is meeting the needs of your pet patient, its owner, and your hospital team as intended. TVN

---

**Five Domains of Quality**

To learn about the Five Domains of Quality, access the 2019 Veterinary Emerging Topics (VET) Report, a collaboration between Banfield Pet Hospital and the NAVC, at banfield.com/vetreport.