
FITNESS & WEIGHT LOSS

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Most people have heard of the rise in obesity in people, but did you know that there is an obesity “epidemic” in our pets as well? Unfortunately, approximately 25-45% of our pets are considered obese - a huge number, considering that our pet’s weight is largely under our control as pet owners.

Obesity is most commonly found in middle-aged dogs, but can occur even in puppies. Not surprisingly, our eating and exercise habits as owners often contribute to our pet’s unhealthy weight, although some dog breeds have predispositions to obesity, including Labrador Retrievers, Beagles, Basset Hounds, and English Bulldogs. When pets are overweight, their entire bodies are stressed, contributing to orthopedic injuries, acceleration of arthritis, heart disease, diabetes, skin problems, and can even lead to the premature death of the pet.

Weight loss occurs when we provide a healthy lifestyle for our pets with a balanced combination of diet and exercise. Moderate-intensity exercise stimulates burning of calories, and thus the fat that comprises extra body weight. Exercise can be challenging in Houston’s heat and humidity since our pets don’t sweat like we do. Instead, dogs primarily cool their body temperatures by panting, which is a less effective method than sweating. This makes dogs more susceptible to overheating and heat stroke than humans, a very serious concern when exercising with your pet outdoors. Overweight dogs’ risk is exacerbated by their excess

body fat, which further insulates retained body heat. Providing a controlled environment for obese pets not only mitigates the risk of overheating but also adds safety against injury. A physical therapist specializing in animal rehabilitation can provide a safe and healthy program for obese pets to start shedding those extra pounds!

After completing a thorough initial evaluation, a physical therapist can create a customized individual program designed to meet each pet’s individual needs. For out of shape dogs focusing on weight loss, exercise in a water treadmill system allows the physical therapist to modulate the intensity of the patient’s work-out through water height and the speed of the treadmill belt. The buoyancy of the water also protects patients’ joints against excessive concussive forces generated by excess body weight while resisting movements for strengthening. Appropriate water temperature aids in effective cooling; the added benefit of being indoors is the air conditioning! Each individual patient’s needs and the goals for therapy determine how each of these variables is employed.

In addition to cardiovascular exercise in the underwater treadmill, the physical therapist can incorporate additional

exercises to address all facets of wellness and fitness, including therapeutic exercise for strengthening, balance training, and coordination activities. Dogs with orthopedic issues, such as osteoarthritis or joint diseases, experience particular benefits from these activities; dogs without orthopedic disorders can attenuate their risk of developing them. Stretching, massage, and physical modalities (including LASER, ultrasound, and electrical stimulation) may be employed for dogs with additional needs as well.

Improving the health of our overweight pets begins with a commitment to a safe, controlled exercise program and a healthy, balanced diet. If you are concerned that your pet is overweight, check with your family veterinarian to see if a consultation with a physical therapist specializing in animal rehabilitation would benefit your pet!

