

Survey Reveals Pet Owners Don't Recognize Excess Weight, Struggle with Pet Weight Loss, and Give Lots of Dog Treats

Executive Summary by Dr. Ernie Ward

A recent study by the Association for Pet Obesity (APOP) sheds light on pet weight concerns in the United States. The 2022 U.S. Pet Obesity Prevalence Survey found a staggering 61% of cats and 59% of dogs are overweight or have obesity, indicating a widespread problem with pet health. However, a survey conducted in Winter 2023 among pet owners and veterinary professionals showed a lack of awareness about this issue. Only 28% of cat owners and 17% of dog owners acknowledged that their pets were overweight, with 84% of dogs and 70% of cat owners assessing their pets' body condition as healthy.

“Over the past two decades, we have consistently observed a significant discrepancy between the prevalence of pet obesity and pet owners' recognition of this issue,” observed APOP Founder and President. Dr. Ernie Ward. “Pet owners reporting that ‘pet obesity is a problem, but not for my pet’ continues to be a communication hurdle for veterinary professionals. While the causes of obesity in animals are multifactorial, awareness of an unhealthy body condition is the first step in treating the disease.”

Despite this, many pet owners reported they were trying to address the issue, with 63% of dogs and 45% of cat owners attempting to help their pets lose weight. However, the survey also found that only a small percentage of pets had been put on therapeutic weight loss diets, with 16% of dogs and 24% of cat owners sharing they tried such diets.

Further complicating matters, many pet owners reported frequent treat-giving habits. 58% of dog owners and 12% of cat owners admitted to giving treats more than once a day, while an additional 24% of dogs and 18% of cats received treats at least once daily. 30% of cat owners revealed they gave no treats, with only 4% of dog owners claiming to restrict treats.

In a survey of 527 U.S. pet owners conducted from October to December 2023, 84% of dog owners and 94% of cat owners believed pet obesity is a significant health issue. Yet only 43% reported that “their veterinarian annually discusses their pet's optimal weight or body condition,” indicating many veterinary professionals are missing an opportunity to discuss a pet's body condition during its yearly examination.

One reason veterinarians fail to discuss weight issues with pet owners is because they believe they may upset the owner. 84% of veterinary professionals responded that a pet owner had “appeared embarrassed or angry after being told their pet was overweight or needed to lose weight.”

The findings are very different from the perspective of pet owners. Only 12% of pet owners reported they had “ever felt uncomfortable or embarrassed about a veterinary or veterinary staff member saying your pet needs to lose weight or has obesity.”

In fact, 76% of pet owners revealed their “veterinarian would be comfortable telling you your pet needs to lose weight or has obesity.” with only 4% feeling that their veterinarian would be uncomfortable discussing pet obesity and 14% as “maybe.” These findings are consistent with earlier APOP surveys on this issue.

“Pet owners consistently report being interested in their pet’s body condition. Unfortunately, many veterinary professionals continue to worry their clients will be upset if obesity is mentioned. This reveals an opportunity for better communication training, patient support tools, and treatments,” remarked Dr. Ward.

Sharing food with pets is often blamed as a primary cause of pet obesity. Interestingly, many pet owners claim they rarely “share their food or snacks.” 25% of dog owners and 53% of cats stated they “never” shared with their pets, while 33% of dogs and 30% of cats reported “rarely,” and 25% of dogs and 12% of cats received shared food or snacks “sometimes.” 17% of dog owners and 4% of cat owners responded that they “usually” to “always” share food and treats.

Treats are also considered a contributing factor to the increasing pet obesity rates. 82% of dogs and 30% of cats were reported to receive treats at least once daily. The reasons for giving treats to dogs and cats varied by species. For dogs, the most common reason for offering daily treats was as a training tool, followed by “makes my dog happy.” The third most common reason for daily dog treats was to supplement the diet and then as a way to mitigate begging behaviors.

For cats that received regular treats, making their cat happy was the most common reason given, followed by training, dietary supplements, and satisfying begging behaviors.

During World Pet Obesity Week, October 7-13, 2024, APOP and the World Pet Obesity Association will conduct their biennial pet obesity prevalence survey. For more information about the 2023 Pet Owner and Veterinary Professional survey results, visit [here](#). To learn more about World Pet Obesity Week and participate in the 2024 survey, visit [here](#).