



Helping Pets Live Longer & Healthier Lives AN INTERVIEW WITH ANGELA STEPHENS

Meet Angela Stephens—a certified veterinary technician and technician supervisor at Barbur Blvd Veterinary Hospital in Portland, Oregon. Angela submitted the winning essay for the Project: Pet Slim Down contest that featured compelling patient weight-loss stories from Purina Certified Weight Coaches. In honor of **National Pet Obesity Awareness Day** (October 10), we interviewed Angela about her journey as a technician and her focus on pet nutrition. Read her pet weight-loss story at purinaveterinarydiets.com/Veterinarian/Education/DailyNutritionMatters.aspx.—Kelly Soldavin, Editorial Director

Why did you choose a career in veterinary medicine?

I pursued a career that stimulates my desire to learn and places me in a profession that is constantly evolving. Each pet presents its own unique challenges and, sometimes, what seems to be routine is anything but! In the past 11 years I have seen advancement in pain management, increased emphasis on dentistry and preventive care, and continued expansion of veterinary specialty care. It is exciting to be part of such growth and I am proud of my profession.

What drew your attention to pet nutrition?

I became interested in pet nutrition when the life span study¹ was released by Purina Pet Care in 2002. I was a rookie in the veterinary field and owner of a young schnauzer, my first dog as an adult. The study demonstrated that maintaining ideal body condition in dogs could extend their lives by approximately 2 years as well as delay the onset of arthritis and help prevent some diseases, such as diabetes.

The message was clear to me—I wanted my dog to live as long as possible and, if there was a way I could help that happen, I was going to do it! I also wanted to share this information with others, so they could enjoy the same benefits with their own pets; therefore, I have focused on client communication and education about pet nutrition as well as developed nutritional plans for their pets.

What do you think is the biggest challenge veterinary professionals face regarding pet nutrition?

I feel that effective communication with the client in a compassionate manner is one of the most difficult challenges. Pet owners' feeding choices can be an extremely touchy subject—whether brand of food or what snacks they are feeding. It can be uncomfortable to tell clients that their pets are overweight, and effective communication that inspires a client to change his or her feeding strategies can be difficult.

Sometimes owners can't resist the urge to love their pets with food and treats. This type of client needs to be educated in a nonjudgmental and caring way that builds trust in the message that a "healthy weight" pet has a much greater chance of living a longer and healthier life.

What tools or resources do you recommend for effective client communication about pet nutrition?

It is important to be knowledgeable about the veterinary diet line you are representing. You should feel comfortable and confident when discussing needed diet changes with clients, clearly conveying why the recommended food is better for their pets than what is currently fed.

Use body condition scoring to help the client evaluate his or her pet's weight. Demonstrate how to assess body fat accumulation across the ribs and base of tail, the waistline, and abdominal tuck. Discuss how body condition assessment determines whether weight reduction is necessary.

Talk about the owner's feeding habits, calculate calorie intake, and then create feeding guidelines that provide the recommended calories but are similar to the owner's current feeding practices. This approach encourages compliance and reduces the perception of drastic change. I send the client home with clearly written instructions and a measuring cup.

Brief follow-up consultations and weigh-ins every 4 to 6 weeks are recommended to assist the owner with any questions or challenges and make any necessary adjustments.

Tell us why being a veterinary professional is meaningful to you.

I find the greatest satisfaction by making a positive impact on pets and their families. I strive to create a "WOW" experience for clients during their visits to our clinic. Attention to minor details when interacting with a client and pet provides the opportunity to form a personal connection and lasting bond. It means the most when I receive feedback that owners and their pets trust me and that I have made a difference in their pets' care. ■

Reference

1. Kealy RD, Lawler DF, Ballam JM, et al. Effect of diet restriction on life span and age-related changes in dogs. *JAVMA* 2002; 220(9):1315-1320.