

A WEIGHTY ISSUE The 2020 Veterinary Emerging Topics Report found that less than 10% of overweight dogs successfully lose weight after their initial diagnosis.

FROM THE FIELD

Addressing the Growing Problem of Overweight Pets

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From the Field shares insights from **Banfield Pet Hospital** veterinary team members. Drawing from the nationwide practice's extensive research, as well as findings from its electronic veterinary medical records database and more than 8 million annual pet visits, this column is intended to explore topics and spark conversations relevant to veterinary practices that ultimately help create a better world for 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.”

Given the ongoing pet obesity epidemic in the U.S., 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 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 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 the following:

- 51% of the more than 1.9 million adult dogs seen at Banfield in 2018 were classified as overweight.
- Of those, less than 10% successfully lose weight following overweight diagnosis, regardless of their age.
- Of the limited number of pets that do lose weight, roughly 40% re-gain weight and their overweight status within 12 months.



Overweight pets: let's talk before the problem gets any bigger

Veterinary Emerging Topics (VET)[®] Report

Banfield Pet Hospital[®] and the North American Veterinary Community (NAVC) teamed up to explore a growing epidemic: pets diagnosed as overweight.

51% OF ADULT DOGS SEEN AT BANFIELD ARE OVERWEIGHT.

AND MANY OF THOSE PETS STAY OVERWEIGHT:

<10%

of overweight dogs successfully lose weight after initial overweight diagnosis.

~40%

of overweight dogs that successfully lose weight and attain healthy weight status re-gain overweight status within 12 months.

THERE ARE CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME:

39%

of hospital teams are rarely or never able to get a diet history from owners.

~42%

of hospital teams report most owners are rarely engaged with the weight loss plan at follow-up appointment.



OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the challenges, pet weight loss is achievable. And the solution is something largely within our control: engaging pet owners in the importance of weight in their pet's health.



Incorporate a nutritional assessment as part of the veterinary visit. Include assessment both before and after excess weight gain.



Position pet weight loss as team effort. Arm the full team with consistent messaging to keep clients engaged and committed.



Create an individualized weight loss plan. Remember, there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

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BOX 1 Pet Weight Loss Success!



- 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 prevalence increases with breed size, but smaller breeds topped the list of most affected breeds.
- Smaller dogs were more successful at losing weight, but there was variation within each breed size category.

PARTNERING WITH OUR MOST IMPORTANT ALLIES

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 our veterinary medical records, Banfield conducted a random survey of the owners of 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 veterinary technicians, we also found that pet owner education and engagement throughout the weight loss process is an important step we can take to help overweight pets get the care they deserve—and ideally, reverse current trends.

In doing so, we can promote weight loss and maintenance of a healthier weight, thereby reducing the risks of developing associated chronic conditions such as OA. Weight loss and maintenance is an important component of managing OA because reducing the excess weight and fat of a pet may reduce clinical signs of OA and improve the pet's overall comfort, mobility, and quality of life.

PUTTING OUR FINDINGS TO USE IN PRACTICE

While there may be barriers to successful weight loss and maintenance, we outlined several areas of opportunity for veterinary professionals in the 2020 VET Report. It's important that veterinary professionals develop stronger partnerships with pet owners. This connection improves a pet owner's engagement and commitment to their pet's weight and helps them understand its importance to overall health and quality of life (**BOX 1**).

More specifically, here are 3 opportunities to improve our management of overweight pet cases:

1. **Incorporate a complete nutritional assessment into the 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.



2. **Create an individualized 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 healthier 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 whole hospital team with consistent messaging to keep clients engaged and committed to any weight loss (or maintenance) plan.

It is important to remember that actions you take 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 5 domains of quality (Safe, Effective, Timely, Efficient, Pet/Client-Centered) in mind. 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. **TVP**

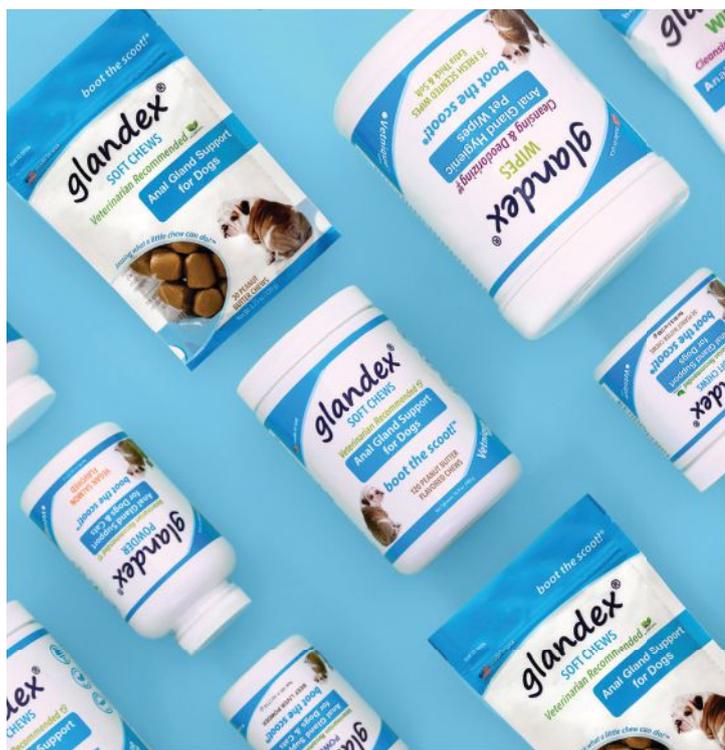
Suggested Reading

- Cline MG, Murphy M, eds. *Obesity in the Dog and Cat*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press; 2019.



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Dr. Saito is a member of the Veterinary Affairs team at Banfield Pet Hospital's headquarters in Vancouver, Wash. As senior manager of veterinary research programs, Dr. Saito leverages Banfield's electronic medical records to understand pet health trends and to improve patient outcomes by supporting Banfield's Medical Quality program. She is an alumna of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Pennsylvania, Emory University, and the University of Colorado. Her broad career history includes laboratory research, small animal practice, and animal health surveillance.



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