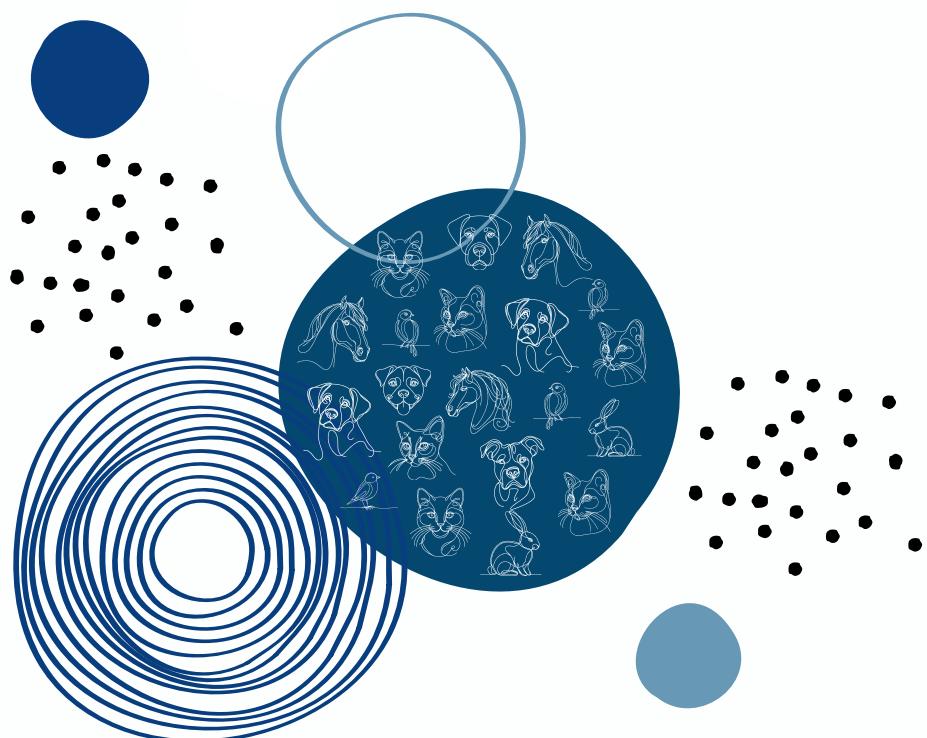


GUIDELINES FOR PET OBESITY COMMUNICATION

Promoting Respectful
Communication about
Animal Obesity

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INTRODUCTION

Pet obesity is a complex and multifactorial disease that affects millions of animals worldwide. The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP) and the World Pet Obesity Association (WPOA) recognize the significant role of professional publications, medical presentations, journalism, media, and corporate advertising in shaping public perceptions about pet obesity.

To advance understanding and promote respectful, compassionate, and effective communication about pet obesity, this document outlines best practices for professional publications, journalists, media outlets, and advertising agencies. These guidelines aim to reduce stigma, avoid blame, and foster a more accurate understanding of this medical condition.

The owners of pets affected by obesity or excess weight often face stigma and discrimination, which can affect their access to veterinary care and their pet's overall well-being. Veterinary professionals should be aware that these negative experiences may lead to emotional distress in both pet owners and their pets, resulting in anxiety, withdrawal, or refusal to accept medical recommendations.

The impact of this stigma is far-reaching, affecting both the emotional and physical health of pets and their caregivers, highlighting the need for compassionate, stigma-free care in veterinary practice.

By adopting principles of "pet-first language" and guidance from veterinary and animal welfare organizations, this document provides a framework for empathetic, accurate, and respectful communication about animal obesity. Together, we can create a more supportive and inclusive environment for pets, their caregivers, and the veterinary professionals who serve them.

PET OBESITY COMMUNICATIONS
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

AVOID “OBESE” AND USE PET-FIRST LANGUAGE

Language has the power to shape perceptions and drive actions. When we choose respectful, precise terminology, we foster greater understanding and reduce the stigma that often surrounds sensitive topics.

Words like “obese” or “fat” can carry negative connotations, evoking judgment and shame rather than encouraging constructive dialogue and change. By reframing our language to reflect empathy and scientific accuracy, we create a foundation for more meaningful conversations—ones that prioritize health and well-being over blame or oversimplification. This shift is essential in addressing complex issues like pet obesity with the nuance and compassion they deserve.

ADOPT PET-FIRST TERMINOLOGY

Adopting pet-first language is a powerful way to shift the narrative around obesity, ensuring it is framed as a medical condition rather than a defining trait. Instead of labeling pets as “an obese dog” or “an overweight cat,” use phrases like “a dog with obesity” or “a cat having obesity.” This subtle yet impactful change acknowledges the pet’s individuality while recognizing obesity as a health issue that can be managed.

Example: “Max, a dog with obesity, is undergoing a tailored weight-loss program to improve his health.”

Why it works: This phrasing places Max’s individuality first while framing obesity as a manageable health condition, emphasizing care and treatment without assigning blame to either the pet owner or animal.

Avoid: “Max is an obese dog who needs to lose weight.”

Why it’s problematic: This reduces Max to his condition, making obesity a defining characteristic rather than a treatable health issue. It can also carry a judgmental tone that the pet owner is at fault or provides sub-optimal care.

AVOID “OBESE” AND USE PET-FIRST LANGUAGE

Example: “The cat has obesity, which increases her risk of chronic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, and arthritis.”

Why it works: This approach avoids labeling the cat by her condition and instead focuses on the risk of future health consequences, fostering a more compassionate and solution-oriented tone.

Avoid: “Because Gracie is obese, she is at risk for health problems.”

Why it's problematic: Using “obese” as a descriptor for the pet oversimplifies the issue and fails to acknowledge obesity as a medical condition. This phrasing implies negligence on the part of the owner, which can lead to feelings of guilt or resentment. It also fails to acknowledge other potential contributing factors, such as genetics, medical conditions, or environmental influences.

By adopting pet-first language and avoiding blame, we can ensure that conversations about obesity remain respectful, accurate, and focused on the pet's health and well-being while encouraging collaboration rather than defensiveness.

AVOID “OBESE” AND USE PET-FIRST LANGUAGE

AVOID PEJORATIVE DESCRIPTORS

Language is crucial in shaping how we understand and respond to pet obesity. Terms like “fat,” “chonky,” or “fluffy,” while sometimes used casually, can trivialize the disease and reinforce harmful stereotypes. These descriptors risk minimizing the significant health risks associated with obesity and may unintentionally discourage pet owners from taking the issue seriously.

Example: “Your dog has pre-clinical obesity, which increases her risk of chronic diseases like osteoarthritis.”

Why it works: This approach avoids labeling the pet by her condition and instead focuses on the medical implications, fostering a more compassionate and solution-oriented tone.

Avoid: “Your cat is a chonkster, putting her at risk of health problems.”

Why it’s problematic: Using “chonkster” as a descriptor for the cat oversimplifies the issue and fails to acknowledge obesity as a medical condition. It also lacks the empathy and specificity needed to encourage action.

Example: “Bella, a cat with obesity, is working with their veterinary team to improve her mobility and overall health.”

Why it works: This approach centers on the pet’s individuality, frames obesity as a treatable condition, and highlights collaboration between the owner and veterinary professionals.

Avoid: “Max is a lazy dog who needs to lose weight.”

Why it’s problematic: Describing Max as “lazy” reduces him to his condition and indirectly places blame on both the dog and the owner, fostering shame or defensiveness. It oversimplifies the complex causes of obesity and discourages open discussion.

Casual terms like “chonky” or “fluffy” can trivialize obesity, minimizing its serious health risks and discouraging action. Instead, using medically accurate, empathetic language—such as “pre-clinical obesity” or “a cat with obesity”—helps frame the issue as a treatable medical condition. This approach encourages proactive care without stigma or blame.

AVOID “OBESE” AND USE PET-FIRST LANGUAGE

FOCUS ON THE CONDITION, NOT APPEARANCE

When discussing pet obesity, prioritize health over appearance by framing obesity as a medical condition that requires treatment. Instead of presenting weight loss as a matter of improving physical appearance, emphasize the health benefits and risk reduction associated with managing obesity.

Example: “Luna is being treated for obesity to reduce her risk of diabetes and arthritis.”

Why it works: This phrasing frames obesity as a medical condition, focuses on health outcomes, and avoids judgment or emphasis on appearance. It encourages a proactive, solution-oriented mindset to a serious health threat.

Avoid: “If Luna lost some of that extra weight, she’d look so much better.”

Why it’s problematic: This statement shifts the focus to appearance rather than health, potentially trivializing the condition and failing to motivate the owner to take meaningful action.

By centering the conversation on health and treatment, rather than appearance or weight, we can create a more supportive and informed dialogue that empowers pet owners to address obesity with empathy and purpose.

DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN CLINICAL OBESITY, PRE-CLINICAL OBESITY, OBESITY, AND OVERWEIGHT

Accurate terminology is essential for improving clarity about pet obesity and enables clear, non-judgmental communication, highlights the health risks of excess fat, and empowers pet owners to make informed choices.

Clinical obesity is a chronic, systemic disease defined by the presence of excessive adiposity that leads to functional impairments in tissues, organs, or the organism as a whole. It is a medically diagnosed condition in which an animal's body condition score (BCS) 8-9/9 indicates a level of excess body fat that negatively affects health or quality of life, necessitating prompt veterinary intervention. This condition is characterized by pathological changes that disrupt normal physiological processes, underscoring the need for comprehensive medical management.

Pre-clinical obesity is a medically recognized condition defined by a state of excess adiposity (BCS 8-9/9) that increases the risk of developing clinical obesity and associated non-communicable diseases, including type 2 diabetes, organ dysfunction, certain cancers, and behavioral disorders. While tissue and organ function remain preserved at this stage, the condition represents a critical window for intervention. Prioritizing fat loss and lean muscle preservation is essential to mitigate imminent health risks and prevent progression to clinical obesity and its comorbidities.

Obesity is a general term used to describe the presence of excess body fat, typically indicated by a BCS of 8-9/9. It is important to note that this term is descriptive and does not constitute a formal medical diagnosis. However, it highlights a condition that requires further evaluation and intervention to prevent adverse health effects.

Overweight refers to a body weight or body fat percentage that exceeds the healthy range, often reflected by a BCS of 6-7/9. While not yet classified as obesity, this state requires proactive measures, including individualized weight management strategies, diagnostics, dietary adjustments, and increased physical activity, to prevent progression to pre-clinical obesity. Early intervention is key to maintaining long-term health and well-being.

Clinical Obesity

Clinical obesity is a specific diagnosis of a serious medical condition involving excess adiposity accompanied by clinical signs, abnormal test results, diminished quality of life, or associated diseases requiring medical intervention. This term highlights the medical severity of the condition and distinguishes it from pre-clinical obesity or overweight.

Medical Definition of Clinical Obesity:

Veterinary Clinical Obesity is “a chronic, systemic illness characterized by alterations in the function of tissues, organs, the entire individual, or a combination thereof, due to excess adiposity.”

Key Characteristics of Clinical Obesity:

- **Excess Adiposity:**
 - The pet has an excessive level of body fat, typically indicated by a Body Condition Score (BCS) of 9 on a 9-point scale (or equivalent on other tests).
- **Clinical Signs and Diminished Quality of Life:**
 - The pet exhibits visible signs of health issues, such as difficulty moving, labored breathing, or lethargy, and may have abnormal diagnostic test results (e.g., insulin resistance, elevated liver enzymes, etc.).
- **Impaired Tissue and Organ Function:**
 - Excess body fat has begun to negatively affect the function of tissues and organs, leading to systemic health problems.
- **Presence of Obesity-Related Diseases:**
 - The pet has developed one or more obesity-related conditions, such as diabetes mellitus, osteoarthritis, cardiovascular disease, or respiratory disorders.
- **Requires Immediate Medical Intervention:**
 - Clinical obesity necessitates a comprehensive treatment plan, including weight management, dietary changes, exercise, and possibly medical or surgical interventions to address associated health issues.

DIFFERENTIATE CLINICAL OBESITY, PRE-CLINICAL OBESITY, AND OVERWEIGHT

Clinical Obesity Example in Context: "Your dog has been diagnosed with clinical obesity, with a body condition score of 9, difficulty walking, and the presence of osteoarthritis. We'll create a treatment plan to address their weight and manage their pain to improve their mobility and their quality of life."

Why it works:

- 1. Explicit Diagnosis:** The example states that the dog has been diagnosed with clinical obesity, reinforcing that this is a medical condition rather than a simple weight issue.
- 2. Quantifiable Evidence:** The inclusion of a body condition score (BCS) of 9 provides an objective measure of excess adiposity, aligning with the medical definition of clinical obesity.
- 3. Demonstrated Health Impact:** The symptoms of difficulty walking and osteoarthritis highlight both diminished quality of life and the presence of obesity-related disease, key characteristics of clinical obesity.
- 4. Medical Necessity and Action Plan:** The statement, "We'll create a treatment plan...", establishes that intervention is required, reflecting the definition's emphasis on obesity as a systemic illness requiring medical management.
- 5. Owner Communication and Compliance:** The example effectively conveys the severity of the condition to pet owners while offering a structured approach to improving their pet's health, which is essential for successful treatment adherence.

By clearly defining these terms and their characteristics, veterinary professionals can enhance communication with pet owners, tailor interventions more effectively, and improve outcomes for pets at risk of or affected by obesity.

Integrating these key elements bridges clinical criteria with practical application, strengthening veterinary-client communication and helping pet owners grasp the seriousness of the disease and the necessary steps for improvement.

Pre-Clinical Obesity

Preclinical obesity refers to a state of excess body fat that elevates the risk of disease, characterized by the absence of clinical signs, abnormal diagnostic test results, or comorbidities. It is typically identified by a body condition score (BCS) of 8 or 9 on a 9-point scale.

While tissues and organs may still function normally at this stage, the risk of progressing to clinical obesity and developing related non-communicable diseases—such as type 2 diabetes, arthritis, cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, and behavioral disorders—is significantly increased.

Medical Definition of Pre-clinical Obesity:

Veterinary Pre-Clinical Obesity is a state of excess adiposity characterized by the preserved function of other tissues and organs but a varying but elevated risk of developing clinical obesity and several other non-communicable diseases, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, certain types of cancer, and behavioral disorders.

Key Characteristics of Pre-Clinical Obesity

- **Excess Adiposity:**
 - The pet has a high level of body fat, typically indicated by a Body Condition Score (BCS) of 8-9 on a 9-point scale (or equivalent on other scales).
- **No Clinical Signs or Comorbidities:**
 - The pet does not yet show visible clinical signs of disease (e.g., difficulty moving, labored breathing, etc.) or abnormal diagnostic test results (e.g., elevated blood glucose, abnormal liver enzymes, etc.).
- **Preserved Tissue and Organ Function:**
 - Tissues and organs function normally, but the risk of developing health issues is significantly increased.
- **Increased Disease Risk:**
 - The pet is at a higher risk of progressing to clinical obesity and developing obesity-related conditions, such as diabetes, arthritis, cardiovascular disease, or certain cancers.
- **Proactive Intervention Opportunity:**
 - Preclinical obesity represents a critical window for intervention to prevent the progression to clinical obesity and associated health problems.

DIFFERENTIATE CLINICAL OBESITY, PRE-CLINICAL OBESITY, AND OVERWEIGHT

Pre-Clinical Obesity Example in Context: "Your cat has preclinical obesity, as indicated by its body condition score of 9. While there are no clinical signs or abnormal test results at this time, it is at a higher risk for developing conditions like diabetes, arthritis, or other obesity-related health issues. Taking steps to manage your pet's weight now can lower their risk of health problems and help them live a longer, healthier life."

Why it works:

- Excess Adiposity: A BCS of 9/9 confirms excess body fat.
- No Clinical Signs: The cat shows no symptoms or abnormal tests but remains at risk.
- Preserved Organ Function: Tissues still function normally despite excess fat.
- Increased Disease Risk: Higher likelihood of diabetes, arthritis, and other issues.
- Intervention Opportunity: Managing body condition now reduces future clinical obesity-associated health risks.

By integrating these elements, the example effectively conveys the importance of recognizing and addressing preclinical obesity before it progresses to clinical obesity and disease.

Overweight

"Overweight" describes pets whose body condition exceeds the ideal range (typically a Body Condition Score [BCS] of 6-7 on a 9-point scale) but has not yet reached the threshold for obesity. While overweight pets may not currently exhibit health problems, they are at increased risk for developing associated conditions, such as diabetes, joint issues, or cardiovascular disease, if fat gain continues. Proactive intervention at this stage can prevent the progression to clinical obesity and improve long-term health outcomes.

Medical Definition of Overweight:

In veterinary terms, "overweight" is defined as a body condition where excess body fat is present, typically indicated by a Body Condition Score (BCS) of 6-7 on a 9-point scale (or equivalent on other scales). While overweight pets may not yet exhibit health problems, they are at increased risk for developing obesity-related conditions if weight gain continues.

Key Characteristics of Overweight

- **Excess body fat:** Higher than ideal levels of adipose tissue.
- **Increased health risks:** Elevated risk of progressing to obesity and developing associated conditions (e.g., diabetes, joint issues, etc.).
- **No clinical signs or comorbidities:** Overweight pets generally do not yet show clinical signs of disease or abnormal diagnostic test results.

Overweight Example in Context: "Your dog is overweight, with a body condition score of 7 out of 9. Implementing a weight management program now can prevent obesity and reduce the risk of associated health issues, such as arthritis and blood sugar abnormalities."

EMPHASIZE BODY CONDITION, NOT WEIGHT

When discussing overweight and obesity in animals, focusing on body condition and composition rather than weight alone provides a more accurate and meaningful assessment of their health. Body weight can be misleading because it doesn't distinguish between fat, muscle, or other tissues or communicate a specific health status or risk. Instead, veterinary professionals should emphasize factors like body fat percentage, lean muscle mass, and overall body condition to guide effective interventions and ensure long-term health.

Body Condition Examples:

Example for Assessment of Body Condition: "Your dog's body condition score is 8 out of 9, which indicates an unhealthy level of fat accumulation. While your dog's weight has remained steady at around 85 pounds, the main concern is the excess body fat, which can contribute to inflammation, tissue damage, and mobility issues. Our goal is to help your dog achieve a healthier body condition to improve their quality of life."

Why it works: This explanation shifts the focus from weight to body condition, clearly linking excess fat to specific health risks and emphasizing the importance of addressing the cause of risk and disease.

Example: Muscle Mass Preservation During Fat Loss

"Our goal isn't just weight loss, it's to reduce your pet's unhealthy excess fat while preserving lean muscle. This approach ensures they maintain strength and overall health throughout the weight loss process."

Why it works: This highlights the importance of maintaining muscle mass, which is critical for mobility, metabolism, and overall well-being, while also reassuring the owner that the program is designed with their pet's health in mind

FOCUS ON BODY CONDITION, NOT WEIGHT

Example: Highlighting Healthy Fat Loss

"This month, your cat successfully lost one pound of fat while preserving lean muscle mass. This is an ideal outcome of a healthy body condition program and a great step toward improving their long-term health."

Why it works: This celebrates progress in a way that emphasizes fat loss (the primary goal) rather than just weight loss, reinforcing the importance of a healthy body composition.

By focusing on body condition and composition rather than weight, veterinary professionals can provide a clearer, more accurate picture of a pet's health and guide owners toward interventions that prioritize long-term well-being. This approach also helps pet owners understand the importance of preserving muscle mass and achieving a healthy body composition, rather than simply chasing a number on the scale.

Weight Is A Poor Indicator of Health

Weight alone is often a poor indicator of a pet's overall health, as it doesn't account for changes in body composition, such as muscle loss or fat gain. Relying solely on weight can mask or ignore underlying health risks, making it essential to evaluate body condition and composition for a more accurate assessment.

Example: Weight Can Mask Health Risks

"Although your dog's weight hasn't changed much over the past year, a closer evaluation shows a significant loss of muscle and an increase in body fat. This shift in body composition highlights why weight alone isn't a reliable measure of your pet's health. Addressing these changes now can help prevent future health issues."

Why it works: This example clearly explains how weight can be misleading and emphasizes the importance of looking beyond the scale to understand a pet's true health status.

FOCUS ON BODY CONDITION, NOT WEIGHT

Example: Healthy vs. Unhealthy Weight Loss

"Unintentional weight loss in your pet can sometimes indicate muscle wasting, which is a serious health concern. Our goal is to ensure any weight loss comes from fat reduction while preserving or even building muscle mass. This approach supports your pet's strength, mobility, and overall quality of life."

Why it works: It distinguishes between healthy fat loss and unhealthy muscle loss, helping owners understand the importance of maintaining muscle mass during weight management.

Example: Guiding Owners with Clear Goals

"Our primary goal is to reduce excess body fat while preserving and improving your pet's muscle mass and strength. This not only enhances their quality of life but also lowers the risk of obesity-related diseases like diabetes, arthritis, and heart conditions."

Why it works: It provides a clear, actionable goal for the pet owner by connecting fat loss and muscle preservation to measurable health benefits.

By shifting the focus from weight to body condition and composition, veterinarians can provide more accurate health assessments, tailor interventions to individual needs, and enhance long-term outcomes. This approach also gives pet owners a deeper understanding of their pet's health, fostering more effective and collaborative care.

PROVIDE BALANCED AND ACCURATE COVERAGE

Media and advertising content about pet obesity should be grounded in evidence-based research and present a nuanced, compassionate perspective. By avoiding oversimplification and stigma, we can foster a more informed and empathetic dialogue about this complex health issue.

1. Highlight Scientific Insights

- Emphasize the biological, genetic, and environmental factors that contribute to pet obesity, such as genetic predispositions, hormonal imbalances, or lifestyle constraints. For example, "Pet obesity is influenced by a combination of factors, including genetics, diet, activity levels, and even the environment in which a pet lives. For instance, certain breeds are more prone to weight gain, while urban living may limit opportunities for exercise."
- Avoid placing undue emphasis on individual responsibility without acknowledging the broader context or scientific evidence.

2. Use Credible Sources

- Cite research from veterinary experts, animal nutritionists, and reputable organizations such as the World Pet Obesity Association (WPOA) and the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP).
- Ensure that statistics, recommendations, and claims are backed by peer-reviewed studies or expert consensus.

RESPECT DIVERSITY AND AVOID STEREOTYPES

The way we communicate about pet obesity matters. Using respectful, science-based language helps dismantle harmful stereotypes and fosters constructive, empathetic dialogues between veterinary professionals and pet owners. By avoiding judgment, acknowledging the complex causes of obesity, and highlighting the diverse range of pets affected, we can create a more compassionate and effective approach to addressing this serious health issue. This not only strengthens pet owner trust and cooperation but also promotes better outcomes for the pets in our care.

1. Avoid Humor or Ridicule

- Do not use images or language that portray animals with obesity as comedic, grotesque, or objects of ridicule. Such portrayals perpetuate stigma and undermine the seriousness of the disease.
- Focus on respectful representations that emphasize the pet's dignity and the importance of addressing their health needs.

2. Challenge Stereotypes

- Avoid implying that pets with obesity are the result of negligence, laziness, or lack of care. Obesity is a multifactorial condition influenced by genetics, comorbidities, hormonal imbalances, environmental factors, diet, and activity levels.
- Educate pet owners about the complex causes of obesity and emphasize the importance of a collaborative, nonjudgmental approach to treatment.

3. Showcase Diversity

- Represent pets of all breeds, sizes, and life stages to reflect the broad impact of obesity. Avoid reinforcing stereotypes that only certain types or breeds of pets are affected.
- Use inclusive imagery and stories that highlight the diversity of pets and their unique needs.

RESPECT DIVERSITY AND AVOID STEREOTYPES

4. Highlight Abilities and Roles

- Portray pets with obesity as loved, capable, and integral members of their families. Emphasize their value and the bond they share with their owners.
- Focus on positive, empowering narratives that celebrate progress and the joy pets bring to their families, rather than defining them by their condition.

By following these guidelines, we can create a more inclusive and respectful dialogue around pet obesity. This approach not only reduces stigma but also empowers pet owners to take proactive steps toward improving their pet's health and well-being. Together, we can ensure that every pet is treated with the care, dignity, and compassion they deserve.

SELECT APPROPRIATE CONTEXT AND VISUALS

1. Avoid Oversimplification

- Address pet obesity as a multifactorial disease that requires comprehensive, individualized solutions. Emphasize the importance of veterinary care, therapeutic diets, diagnostic tests, follow-up and home care, and tailored physical activity plans.
- For example, "Managing pet obesity isn't as simple as cutting back on food or increasing walks. A comprehensive plan, developed with your veterinarian, may include a therapeutic diet, structured exercise, and regular monitoring to ensure safe and effective weight loss."
- Avoid reducing pet obesity to simplistic narratives like "feed less, exercise more."

2. Explore Societal Factors

- Discuss how broader societal issues, such as marketing, urban living constraints, and owner lifestyle or education levels, contribute to pet obesity.
- For example, "Urban environments can make it challenging for pets to get enough exercise, while clever marketing of high-calorie pet foods can mislead owners. Educating pet owners about nutrition and providing accessible resources are key to combating this issue."
- Highlight the role of community resources and public awareness campaigns in addressing these challenges.

3. Thoughtful Visual Representation

Imagery plays a powerful tool in shaping public perception. Thoughtful visual representation can help avoid stigma and promote understanding.

SELECT APPROPRIATE CONTEXT AND VISUALS

4. Avoid Stigmatizing Images

- Do not use photos that isolate human or animal body parts (e.g., abdomens or necks) or depict pets in compromising or unhealthy conditions unless directly related to evidence-based interventions.
- Avoid imagery that reinforces negative stereotypes or shame.
- Avoid "A close-up of an overweight pet's abdomen" without context, which may inadvertently shame the pet or owner.

5. Choose Inclusive Representations

- Show diverse breeds, sizes, and ages to reflect the wide range of pets affected by obesity.
- Avoid reinforcing a narrow or stereotypical view of what an "obese pet" looks like.

6. Ensure Dignity

- Portray pets and their owners with respect and compassion, emphasizing the bond between them.
- Highlight the value of pets as cherished companions and owners as caring caregivers.

By providing balanced, accurate, and compassionate coverage, media and advertising can play a vital role in raising awareness, reducing stigma, and promoting effective solutions for pet obesity. This approach not only educates the public but also empowers pet owners to take proactive steps toward improving their pets' health and well-being.

PET OBESITY COMMUNICATIONS
SPECIFIC
RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR MEDIA AND
ADVERTISERS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEDIA AND ADVERTISERS

Language and Framing

To effectively address pet obesity in media and advertising, it's essential to use language and framing that reflect the complexity of the issue while promoting understanding, empathy, and actionable solutions. Here are specific recommendations to guide media content creation:

1. Use Nuanced Language

- Frame pet obesity as a multifaceted medical condition influenced by a combination of biological, genetic, and environmental factors.
- Avoid oversimplified or sensationalist language that reduces the issue to a single cause or solution.

Example: "Obesity in pets is a complex condition influenced by factors such as metabolism, genetics, environment, and lifestyle. Understanding these contributors is key to developing effective solutions."

2. Avoid Sensationalist Headlines and Shaming Narratives

- Steer clear of alarmist or judgmental language that may stigmatize pets or their owners.
- Use headlines and narratives that encourage understanding and constructive action.

Example: Instead of: "Pet obesity crisis spiraling out of control!"

Use: "Understanding the rise of clinical obesity in pets: Causes, risks, and solutions."

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEDIA AND ADVERTISERS

3. Frame Discussions in a Solution-Oriented Manner

- Highlight positive interventions and advancements in veterinary care, such as evidence-based therapeutic diets, innovative technologies, and individualized physical activity and exercise programs.
- Emphasize collaboration between pet owners and veterinary professionals to achieve better outcomes.

Example: “Advances in veterinary nutrition and medicine are helping pets achieve healthier weights and improved quality of life. From therapeutic diets to wearable activity monitors, there are more tools than ever to support pet health.”

4. Focus on Overall Health, Longevity, and Quality of Life

- Shift the focus from weight loss alone to broader health improvements, such as increased mobility, reduced pain, and enhanced energy levels.
- Highlight the importance of preserving muscle mass and reducing excess fat for long-term well-being and improved quality of life.

Example: “This month, your cat lost one pound of excess fat while maintaining lean muscle mass, resulting in improved mobility and a happier, more active demeanor.”

Avoid: “Your pet lost 5 pounds—mission accomplished!”

5. De-emphasize “Pounds or Kilograms Lost”

- Frame success in terms of healthier body composition, improved quality of life, and a reduced risk of clinical obesity rather than focusing solely on weight loss metrics.

Example: “Our goal is to help your pet achieve a healthier body condition by reducing excess fat while preserving muscle mass. This approach not only improves their quality of life but also lowers the risk of conditions like diabetes and arthritis.”

Avoid: “The goal is for your pet to lose 10 pounds as quickly as possible.”

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEDIA AND ADVERTISERS

6. Use Inclusive and Respectful Imagery

- Choose visuals that depict pets and their owners in a positive, dignified light, engaging in healthy activities like walking, playing, or preparing nutritious meals.
- Avoid images that isolate body parts or portray pets or pet owners in compromising or stigmatizing ways.

Example: “Show a diverse range of pets and owners working together on weight management plans, such as enjoying outdoor activities or participating in veterinary check-ups.”

Avoid: “Close-up images of overweight pets or pet owners that focus solely on their size or body shape.”

By adopting these recommendations, media outlets and advertisers can play a pivotal role in reshaping the conversation around pet obesity. This approach not only educates the pet-owning public but also fosters empathy, encourages proactive care, and promotes long-term health and well-being for pets.

Pet Obesity Representation and Imagery

Visuals and imagery play a powerful role in shaping public perception of pet obesity. To promote understanding and reduce stigma, it's essential to use thoughtful, respectful, and health-focused representations. Here are key recommendations for media and advertisers:

1. Avoid “Before-and-After” Photos Focused Solely on Weight Gain and Loss

- Move away from visuals that use weight loss as the sole measure of success. Instead, emphasize improvements in overall health and well-being, such as enhanced mobility, reduced pain, and better quality of life.
- Highlight healthy body composition—preserving lean muscle while losing excess fat—rather than just changes in size or weight.

2. Showcase Comprehensive Health Improvements

- Use visuals and narratives that highlight multiple health benefits, such as improved organ function, better biomarker results (e.g., blood glucose levels), increased longevity, and enhanced physical abilities.
- Emphasize the emotional and physical bond between pets and their owners as they work together toward better health.
- For example, use visuals of a dog playing fetch or a cat climbing comfortably, accompanied by captions like, “After losing excess fat, Max enjoys longer walks and has more energy to play.”

3. Depict Compassionate Veterinary Interactions

- Use visuals that show veterinary professionals engaging with pets and owners in a caring, supportive manner. This helps build trust and reinforces the importance of professional guidance in managing pet obesity.
- Highlight the collaborative relationship between veterinarians, pet owners, and pets in safely achieving health goals.

4. Use Inclusive and Respectful Imagery

- Feature diverse breeds, sizes, and ages to reflect the wide range of pets affected by obesity and avoid reinforcing stereotypes.
- Ensure visuals convey dignity and respect for both pets and their owners, portraying them as valued companions and caring caregivers.

5. Focus on Positive, Action-Oriented Narratives

- Use visuals and captions that emphasize progress and hope, such as pets enjoying improved mobility, playing with toys, or spending quality time with their owners.
- Highlight innovative solutions and advancements in veterinary care, such as therapeutic diets, exercise programs, advances in medicine and lab tests for obesity, or wearable health monitors.

By adopting these guidelines, media outlets and advertisers can create visuals that are not only respectful and inclusive but also effective in promoting a deeper understanding of pet obesity. This approach helps shift the narrative from weight loss alone to overall health and well-being, fostering empathy and encouraging proactive care for pets.

Collaborations with Experts

To ensure accurate, credible, and impactful reporting on pet obesity, media outlets, and advertisers should actively collaborate with veterinary professionals, researchers, and pet care organizations. These partnerships not only enhance the quality of content but also provide valuable insights that resonate with audiences. Here are specific recommendations for effective professional collaborations:

1. Work with Veterinary Professionals and Pet Care Organizations

- Partner with veterinarians, veterinary nutritionists, credentialed veterinary technicians, and researchers to ensure content is grounded in evidence-based science and reflects the latest advancements in pet health.
- Collaborate with reputable organizations such as the World Pet Obesity Association (WPOA), the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP), the World Small Animal Association (WSAVA), and veterinary schools to access credible data and expert perspectives.
- Avoid anecdotal evidence or unverified sources without expert input.

2. Include Quotes, Insights, or Testimonials from Experts

- Feature direct quotes or insights from veterinary professionals to lend credibility and depth to stories.
 - Example Quote from a Veterinarian: “Obesity in pets is a complex condition that requires a personalized approach. By combining therapeutic diets, regular exercise, and ongoing monitoring, we can help pets achieve a healthier weight and improve their overall well-being.”
 - Example Testimonial from a Pet Owner: “Working with our veterinarian, we developed a weight loss plan for our dog, Max. Over six months, he lost excess fat, gained muscle, and now has more energy to play and explore. It’s been life-changing for him—and for us.”
- Use testimonials from pet owners who have successfully managed their pet’s weight with professional guidance, highlighting the positive impact on their pet’s health and quality of life.
- Avoid generic statements without attribution or expert backing.

3. Highlight Collaborative Success Stories

- Share case studies or success stories that demonstrate the effectiveness of collaborative efforts between pet owners, veterinary professionals, and pet care organizations.
- Emphasize the teamwork and expertise involved in achieving positive outcomes.
- Avoid stories that focus solely on individual efforts without acknowledging the role of professional guidance.

4. Leverage Expert-Led Educational Content

- Create educational content such as videos, webinars, or infographics featuring veterinary professionals explaining the science behind pet obesity and practical steps for prevention and management.
- Use expert-approved resources to provide actionable advice, such as portion control guides, exercise tips, or how to interpret pet food labels.
- Avoid content that offers generic advice without expert input or scientific backing.

5. Foster Ongoing Partnerships

- Establish long-term relationships with veterinary professionals and organizations to ensure consistent, accurate, and up-to-date reporting on pet obesity.
- Invite experts to contribute to regular columns, Q&A sessions, or podcasts to address common questions and misconceptions about pet obesity.

By collaborating with experts and leveraging their insights, media, and advertisers can create content that is not only accurate and credible but also engaging and impactful. This approach helps build trust with audiences, promotes informed decision-making, and ultimately supports better health outcomes for pets.

Creating Compassionate Campaigns

When designing advertising campaigns or public awareness initiatives about pet obesity, it's essential to prioritize empathy, education, and positivity. Compassionate campaigns not only raise awareness but also inspire action and foster a supportive environment for pet owners.

Here are key strategies to consider:

1. Empathy-First Storytelling

Share narratives that focus on the bond between pets and their owners and highlight shared efforts to improve health.

- For educational content, provide actionable tips and resources, such as how to recognize obesity in pets or access professional care.
- Celebrate progress by highlighting success stories of pets and owners working together to manage obesity without shaming or blaming.

2. Educational Content

- Provide actionable tips and resources to help pet owners recognize obesity in their pets and take proactive steps.
- Offer guidance on topics such as interpreting body condition scores, choosing appropriate diets, and incorporating exercise into a pet's routine.

3. Celebrate Progress

- Highlight success stories of pets and owners who have worked together to manage obesity, focusing on the positive outcomes and improved quality of life.
- For example, "After six months of dedication, Max, a Golden Retriever, has lost excess fat, gained muscle, and now enjoys longer walks with his owner. Their journey shows that with love and support, pets can achieve healthier, happier lives."
- Emphasize small wins and milestones, such as improved mobility, increased energy, or better overall health, rather than just weight loss.
- Avoid before-and-after photos that focus solely on weight loss without context or celebration of overall health improvements.

CREATING COMPASSIONATE CAMPAIGNS

4. Use Positive, Inclusive Messaging

- Frame messages in a positive, encouraging tone that motivates pet owners to take action without feeling judged or overwhelmed. For example, “Every pet is unique, and so is their journey to better health.”
- Use inclusive language and imagery that reflects the diversity of pets and owners, ensuring everyone feels represented and supported.
- Avoid messages that use fear-based tactics or imply that pet owners are solely responsible for their pet’s condition.

5. Provide Accessible Resources

- Offer easy-to-access resources, such as online tools, local veterinary contacts, or community programs to help pet owners take the next step.
- Create interactive content, such as quizzes or calculators, to engage

6. Foster a Supportive Community

- Create online or in-person communities where pet owners can share their experiences, ask questions, and support one another.
- Host events or webinars featuring veterinary experts to provide guidance and answer common questions about pet obesity.
- Avoid platforms that allow negative or judgmental comments, which can discourage participation.

By incorporating these strategies, campaigns can effectively raise awareness about pet obesity while fostering empathy, education, and positivity. This approach empowers pet owners to take action and creates a supportive environment where pets and their families can thrive.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics should be at the core of all media and advertising efforts related to pet obesity. By adhering to ethical principles, campaigns can foster trust, respect, and positive outcomes for both pets and their owners. Here are key ethical considerations to guide your efforts:

1. Avoid Shaming and Fear-Based Tactics

- Do not use guilt, blame, or fear as motivators in messaging. Shaming pet owners can lead to defensiveness, disengagement, and reluctance to seek help. For example, “Your pet is overweight because you’re not walking it enough.”
- Focus on positive, empowering language that encourages action without judgment. For example, “Small changes can make a big difference in your pet’s health. Let’s work together to help them live their best life.”
- Avoid images and language that imply neglect or failure on the part of the owner.

2. Be Inclusive and Culturally Sensitive

- Ensure campaigns address diverse audiences, including different cultural perspectives on pet care, ownership, and health.
- Use inclusive imagery and language that reflect a variety of breeds, sizes, ages, and owner demographics.
- Avoid content that assumes a one-size-fits-all approach to pet care or ignores cultural differences.

3. Promote Informed Decision-Making

- Provide balanced, evidence-based information that empowers pet owners to make informed decisions about their pet’s health.
- Encourage owners to seek professional guidance from veterinarians or pet care experts rather than relying on unverified or uncredentialed sources.
- Avoid promoting quick fixes or unproven solutions without professional backing.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

4. Respect Privacy and Dignity

- Obtain consent before using images or stories of pets and their owners in campaigns.
- Ensure that all representations of pets and owners are respectful and dignified, avoiding exploitative or sensationalist portrayals.
- Avoid using images or stories without consent or in a way that compromises the dignity of the pet or owner.

5. Prioritize Transparency and Honesty

- Be transparent about the sources of information and any potential conflicts of interest, such as partnerships with pet food brands or veterinary clinics.
- Avoid exaggerated claims or misleading statements about the effectiveness of products or interventions.

6. Focus on Long-Term Well-Being

- Emphasize sustainable, long-term solutions rather than quick fixes or extreme measures. For example, “Achieving a healthy weight is a journey, not a race. By making gradual changes and working with your veterinarian, you can help your pet enjoy a longer, happier life.”
- Highlight the importance of preventive care and ongoing monitoring to maintain a pet’s health over time.

By adhering to these ethical principles, media and advertising campaigns can create a positive, supportive environment for addressing pet obesity. This approach not only builds trust with audiences but also ensures that pets and their owners are treated with the respect and compassion they deserve.

PET OBESITY COMMUNICATIONS
ADDRESSING PET
OBESITY MYTHS AND
MISCONCEPTIONS

ADDRESSING COMMON MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Media and advertisers play a critical role in dispelling common misconceptions about pet obesity. By addressing these myths with accurate, evidence-based information, we can foster a more informed and compassionate understanding of this complex condition. Here's how to effectively debunk some of the most prevalent myths:

Myth 1: Obesity is solely the result of overfeeding.

Response: Obesity in pets is influenced by numerous factors, including genetic predispositions, hormonal imbalances, other co-morbidities and medical conditions, and physical activity levels. While proper nutrition and exercise are vital for good health, addressing obesity often requires a comprehensive multimodal approach guided by veterinary professionals.

Pet obesity is a multifaceted condition influenced by a variety of factors, including genetics, hormonal imbalances, underlying medical conditions, and lifestyle factors such as activity levels and environment. While overfeeding can contribute, it is rarely the sole cause. A comprehensive approach—guided by veterinary professionals—is essential to address the root causes and develop an effective treatment plan.

Example: “Did you know that some dogs are genetically predisposed to weight gain, or that conditions like hypothyroidism can contribute to obesity? It’s not just about food—our veterinarians can help identify and address all the factors affecting your pet’s weight.”

Myth 2: Owners of pets with obesity are neglectful.

Response: Obesity is a multifactorial, complex medical condition that requires education and support, not judgment. Educating owners and providing accessible resources can help them effectively manage their pets' health.

Response: Obesity is a disease, not a reflection of a pet owner's care or dedication. Many pet owners are unaware of the risks or lack access to the resources needed to maintain a healthy body condition. Instead of judgment, owners of pets with obesity need education, support, and actionable solutions to help their pets thrive.

Example: "Caring for a pet with obesity can be challenging, but you're not alone. Our team is here to provide the tools and guidance you need to help your pet live a healthier, happier life."

Myth 3: Weight loss is easy with the proper diet.

Response: Safe and sustainable weight management involves more than diet and treat changes. It includes veterinary guidance, monitoring, and addressing underlying health issues. Evidence-based therapeutic overweight and obesity diets are our first-line treatment for reducing excess fat in animals.

Response: Sustainable weight management is more than just changing a pet's diet. It requires a multimodal approach that includes veterinary guidance, regular monitoring, and addressing any underlying health issues. Evidence-based therapeutic diets are a key component, but they are just one part of a comprehensive plan that may also include exercise, behavior modification, and medical interventions.

Example: "While a balanced diet is important, achieving and maintaining a healthy weight involves more than just food. Our veterinarians will work with you to create a personalized plan that includes exercise, regular check-ups, and ongoing support to ensure long-term success."

Myth 4: Only certain breeds or types of pets are affected by obesity.

Response: Obesity can affect any pet, regardless of breed, size, or age. While some pets may be more genetically prone to weight gain, factors like lifestyle, diet, and environment also play a significant role. It's important to monitor all pets for signs of excess weight and take proactive steps to maintain a healthy body condition.

Example:

“Whether your pet is a Chihuahua or a Great Dane, obesity can impact their health. Regular check-ups and a balanced lifestyle are key to keeping pets of all shapes and sizes in optimal condition.”

Myth 5: A little extra weight is harmless.

Response: Even moderate excess fat tissue can have serious health consequences for pets, including an increased risk of diabetes, arthritis, heart disease, and a shortened lifespan. Maintaining a healthy body condition is essential for your pet's overall well-being and quality of life.

Example:

“Did you know that even a few extra pounds can put your pet at risk for serious health problems? Keeping your pet lean, strong, and healthy can help them live a longer, more active life.”

By addressing these myths with clarity and compassion, media and advertisers can help shift the narrative around pet obesity. This approach not only educates the public but also empowers pet owners to take proactive, informed steps toward improving their pet's health and well-being.

A CALL TO ACTION

Media professionals have the power to reshape the conversation around pet obesity. By embracing pet-first language, avoiding harmful stereotypes, using accurate medical terminology, and providing balanced, evidence-based information, we can reduce obesity bias and stigma, foster compassion, and enhance public understanding of the challenges pets and their owners face.

Shifting the narrative toward health, quality of life, and actionable solutions creates a more supportive environment—one where pet owners feel empowered to seek help without fear of judgment.

The World Pet Obesity Association (WPOA) and the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP) are committed to leading this change. Through education, resources, and collaboration, we equip media professionals, veterinarians, and pet owners with the tools to address pet obesity with accuracy and empathy.

Together, we can ensure that every pet receives the care, respect, and support they deserve—free from judgment, bias, or misinformation. Let's create a future where pets everywhere live healthier, happier lives.

Dr. Ernie Ward - Founder

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