

The dilemma of snacks and treats

Overweight pets

By: Dr George Collings

As I mentioned in a previous PETS International article on pet health, one of the biggest health problems in the pet industry is overweight and obese pets. The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention estimated that there were over 40 million overweight dogs in the US.

Definitions

Some define obesity as a pet that has 15% more weight than their ideal bodyweight. Some breeds are more prone to being overweight (Retrievers, Cairn Terrier, Basset Hound, Cocker Spaniel, Beagles and more). Like humans, overweight pets have higher incidences of cancer, kidney disease, diabetes, arthritis and joint issues reducing quality of life and potential lifespan.

Once a pet is overweight, it is difficult for owners and veterinarians to develop weight reduction plans that are easy to enforce. It is clear that this is a complex topic, which must address food type, palatability, activity level, neutering/spaying, genetics, breed type, age, environment, medications and overall health. It is clear that over-eating of calories is the biggest contributor to this problem.

Dilemma

The real dilemma is that pet owners want to use treats to forge bonds between themselves and their pets, which provides a significant source of sales growth for many companies. It is difficult for the average consumer to know how to 'count' calories and keep a weight reduction programme on

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track. Unfortunately, it leaves the veterinary community to deal with the health issues of overweight/obese pets and the difficulty of encouraging weight loss by adding new habits of exercise and calorie reduction.

Most pet food companies have treat brands ranging from baked biscuits to soft-moist to edible chews in many shapes, colours and sizes. These are attractive products to consumers, but most are high in calories due to fat or size or they are nutritionally imbalanced and are not 'complete and balanced'. Many newer companies have focused their sales on treats only as a market entry because sales are easier and inventory management is a smaller cost compared to complete and balanced foods. These treats look more like human foods with the formulated ingredients and have great eye appeal to the consumer.

Imbalanced diet

Since foods are formulated to be complete and balanced or to meet specific nutritional goals, the addition of anything else would suggest a possible imbalance to the nutritional formulation. This would include treats, snacks, supplements, scraps from the table, chew bones, rawhides, and other edible products.

It has been estimated that many food regimes given by pet owners include 20% to 40% more calories added than suggested in the feeding recommendations by the pet food manufacturers. Variation in calorie recommendations is confounded by the fact that there is no approved calorie table for an individual pet that all manufacturers follow. Feeding guidelines are only recommendations because variation in caloric need by an individual pet would exist with environmental temperature (heat/cold), life-stage, activity level, health, disease and breed.

One solution offered by the veterinary communities is to publish calories on all pet products (foods, treats, chews, supplements, et cetera) to help veterinarians and consumers alike calculate the calorie intake that best fits the pet in the specific environment it is in with its level of activity. This type of information would be needed to conceive and monitor a weight reduction plan for the pet that is already overweight. There is no doubt that this is helpful, but there is some cause for concern that a large percentage of consumers will not actively use this information regularly.

Possible solutions

One of the best first steps would be to encourage that all treats be complete and balanced nutritionally. This would not reduce the calories, but would help eliminate the likely imbalances in nutrition that help lead to many health concerns later in life. If a treat was not complete and balanced, a consumer should be made aware of that. Another option would be to expand feeding recommendations on treat packaging to help consumers know how much pet food to reduce to adjust for the caloric impact of the additional treats. These seem like good marketing steps to bring together all groups involved with pets to help reduce pet obesity. As mentioned before, the publishing of calories is closer to being normal on all packaging, but caloric feeding guidelines and how to use them requires communication from all brands through both stores and veterinary clinics.

There are other options in treat product development that should be explored. Listed below are some that exist now and some coming in the future:

- The addition of L-Carnitine has helped change fat metabolism and increase lean body mass in pets. There is evidence that L-Carnitine is low in some pet food types

so it is possible that an addition to all pet food and treats would be warranted.

- Reduction in calories in foods seems to be an obvious choice. This can be done in products with the reduction in fats and sugars while increasing fibre. Some fibres may also help in managing satiety and insulin release.
- Unique products are being developed with very low calories through many new processing options while others offer liquid treats that can be licked from a unique delivery bottle. This later idea allows for pets to lick ten to fifteen times developing the pet to owner bond, but only providing one to two calories.
- Some natural nutraceuticals are being developed to alter brain and intestinal controls of intake. This would help regulate the desire of the pet to over-consume. It is uncertain if these will be regulated as drugs if metabolic control claims are pursued. Perhaps these might be used in the really obese cases.

The attention on pet health is only growing as consumers see their pets as part of the family and companions and no longer an animal. Prevention of disease and increasing the life of their pets is paramount to their decisions yet consumers lack the right tools. The companies that see this need are sure to be leaders in the industry promoting health and longevity of pets. ■