

# HOW VETERINARY REHABILITATION CAN BENEFIT OBESE DOGS

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Charlie enjoys a veterinary acupuncture session as part of his weight loss and conditioning program for shoulder osteoarthritis and a partial cranial cruciate ligament rupture.

Canine obesity is not just one disease — it represents a major risk factor for a plethora of serious yet preventable health problems. That fat, adorable, jiggly Labrador in your exam room is at risk for developing diabetes mellitus, urinary incontinence, osteoarthritis, and pulmonary diseases, as well as many other life-threatening conditions,<sup>1</sup> and is also at risk for a shortened life span.<sup>2</sup> Veterinary rehabilitation practices offer you the opportunity to recommend safe and successful weight loss programs that will assist clients with obese dogs. Each patient will most likely present with a significant number of comorbidities (such as marked osteoarthritis) that must be carefully managed to ensure his safety. Trained veterinary rehabilitation therapists are perfectly positioned to help these dogs.

## START WITH AN IN-DEPTH CLIENT INTERVIEW

Studies have indicated that 34% to 59% of dogs are obese or overweight.<sup>1,3,4,5</sup> In order to tackle this heavy problem (no pun intended), a number of investigations must begin. An in-depth interview surrounding the dog's lifestyle should be conducted, including but not limited to:

- Daily routine: A rundown of a typical day for the client's dog.
- Current activity level: This includes walks, runs, play, etc.
- Quality of life: How does the client feel the dog is dealing with his weight?
- Complete calorie count, including treats and table scraps: Don't forget to ask how the client is measuring the dog's food — do they use a common cup or a standard measuring cup?
- Previous medical history, including recent bloodwork: It is absolutely essential to rule out any underlying metabolic conditions that will dampen weight loss efforts, such as hypothyroidism or hyperadrenocorticism.<sup>1</sup>

## SET MUTUAL AND OBTAINABLE GOALS WITH THE CLIENT

It is also necessary to establish realistic expectations with the client. Every client's lifestyle is unique, and weekly rehabilitation or underwater treadmill visits may not be reasonable or realistic to him or her. The client may not agree that the dog's weight represents a major issue or hindrance to overall well-being. For these hesitant clients, the author provides research studies<sup>2</sup> while also highlighting the fact that physically fit dogs, just like humans, are likely to live longer than overweight ones. It may be necessary to discuss the high probability of chronic diseases, such as diabetes and arthritis, and their associated financial costs. By setting mutually agreed-upon and obtainable goals, you will find clients are more compliant and honest, leading to more successful outcomes for weight loss programs.

## WEIGHT LOSS PROGRAM BASICS IN VETERINARY REHABILITATION PRACTICE

### *Controlling the calories: food intake*

Counting all the calories coming into the dog before initiating the weight loss program will make it easier to control the calories coming in after the program starts. As a trained veterinary canine rehabilitation therapist, this author prefers to have clients complete a "daily food diary" of everything and anything that enters the dog's mouth. In more cases than not, one family member is the predominant "treat-giver" (or "calorie-provider"). Explaining to clients how to read the kilocalorie count on a treat or food bag will help them realize just how many kilocalories they are feeding their furry kids every day. It is strongly recommended that this food diary be kept up throughout the weight loss program in order to keep clients accountable for their dogs' daily food intake.

Once clients understand the number of kilocalories their dogs should be consuming, it is then a matter of adjusting their daily kilocalorie intake. The veterinary market offers numerous weight loss diets that target satiety with increased fiber content. Alternatively, you may find that simply cutting out all high-calorie (and heavily-laden fat content) treats is a far more effective method.

### ***Safely increasing activity levels***

Just as in human medicine, increased activity levels can help burn fat and preserve joint function. For obese dogs, however, a veterinary rehabilitation weight loss program tailors the program to each patient's current ability. Overweight or obese dogs are at increased risk for musculoskeletal injuries; concurrent diseases, such as tracheal collapse or painful osteoarthritis, can affect the safety of prolonged exercise. Land-based exercises, joint manipulation, land dog treadmills, acupuncture, and hydrotherapy (underwater treadmill therapy — UWTM) can be utilized to provide a safe, pain-free weight loss plan for any obese or overweight dog.

- Land-based exercises consist of personalized exercises targeting core muscle groups, as well as exercises to increase endurance without placing excessive pressure on the joints. A major benefit of land-based exercises is that they can be taught to the client and continued in the home setting for the rest of the dog's life. Once your patient has lost the excess weight, the next step is to maintain that lower weight! Veterinary rehabilitation therapists are trained in these exact areas.
- Underwater treadmill therapy safely increases the obese/overweight patient's endurance level via a reduced weight-bearing and buoyant environment. The warm water environment can aid in muscle relaxation and facilitate the



**With underwater treadmill therapy, Roxy is able to increase her endurance without putting excessive strain on her arthritic joints.**

## LESS LAUNDRY, CALMER PATIENTS



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## For veterinary rehab practices – marketing your weight loss program

If you have a veterinary rehabilitation practice, marketing your weight loss program to local animal hospitals can involve a variety of techniques. These may include social media tactics showcasing “before” and “after” pictures/videos, as well as discounts for weight loss-only programs. A coupon offering discounted consultations can be a popular conduit for spreading the word.

Flyers can be created that highlight the benefits of the program, while also stating the requirements. As well, referring hospitals should be informed that your rehabilitation practice will require bloodwork to rule out underlying conditions, and that you will recommend to clients that these laboratory services be performed by the referring hospitals.

Offering daycare at a minimal cost, or even at no cost, for the weight loss program could persuade more clients to opt for your program over a doggie daycare-only plan.

## Sample weight loss program at a veterinary rehabilitation practice

Service	Date	Session	Tech/ Dr.	NOTES
<b>Week 1</b>				Track weight every week.  Email daily food diary with kilocalorie calculation every week.
Hydrotherapy (UWTM)			/	
Rehabilitation/Land Exercises			/	
Veterinary Acupuncture			/	
<b>Week 2</b>				
Hydrotherapy (UWTM)			/	
Rehabilitation/Land Exercises			/	
<b>Week 3</b>				
Hydrotherapy (UWTM)			/	
Rehabilitation/Land Exercises			/	
<b>Re-assess patient at this time</b>				

motivation to walk. Turbulence and depth can all be controlled for a more individualized workout. Weaker patients will reap more benefits from the safety and control of an underwater treadmill than in open swimming pools. Research has demonstrated that raising the water level to hip height reduces the total body weight to about 38%.<sup>6</sup> Swimming pools also offer these benefits, but in a more uncontrolled setting.

### *Managing pain in patients with concurrent osteoarthritis*

For obese dogs that also have advanced osteoarthritis, veterinary rehabilitation therapists offer non-invasive pain management techniques, including veterinary acupuncture and veterinary therapeutic laser therapy. These methods can be incorporated easily into any weight loss program. See the table above for an example of a weight loss program within a veterinary rehabilitation practice.

### **ANALYZING WEIGHT LOSS SUCCESS**

Weight loss success can be measured in a number of ways; most often, of course, the measurement of true success is seeing numbers decrease on the electronic scale. While your clients may wish to quantify success this way, the author believes that a number of other factors should also be included when analyzing the success of a weight loss program. Every week, the following should be gauged:

- Stance
- Energy levels
- Stamina
- Quality of life
- Decrease or elimination of comorbidity signs (such as coughing from tracheal collapse or limping from arthritis)

Stance analysis can include weekly or bi-weekly standing photographs — body changes may appear very small from week to week, but an initial photograph or “before” video versus the end photograph or “after” video can speak volumes!



<sup>1</sup> German AJ. “Concurrent Symposia 2: Pet nutrition and chronic disease; outcomes of weight management in obese pet dogs: what can we do better?” *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*. 2016 Aug; 75(3):398-404.

<sup>2</sup> Kealy RD, Lawler DF, Ballam JM, et al. “Effects of diet restriction on life span and age-related changes in dogs”. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2002 May 1; 220(9): 1315-20.

<sup>3</sup> McGreevy PD, Thomson PC, Pride C et al. “Prevalence of obesity in dogs examined by Australian veterinary practices and risk factors involved”. *Vet Rec*. 2005 May 28; 156(22):695-702.

<sup>4</sup> Lund EM, Armstrong PJ, Kirk CA, et al. “Prevalence and risk factors for obesity in adult dogs from private US veterinary practices”. *Int J Appl Res Vet Med*. 2006;4(2):177-186.

<sup>5</sup> Colliard L, Ancel J, Benet JJ, et al. “Risk factors for obesity in dogs in France”. *J Nutr*. 2006 July; 136:1951S – 1954S.

<sup>6</sup> Owen, MR. “Rehabilitation Therapies for musculoskeletal and spinal disease in small animal practice”. *The European Journal: companion animal practice*. 2006;16 (2):137-148.