



Policy Position: Obesity in dogs

Introduction

Obesity in dogs, as in humans, has been defined as being overweight to the extent that serious effects on the individual's health become likely [1]. Canine obesity is a preventable disease and is the most common nutritional disorder seen in dogs, caused by an imbalance when more energy is taken in than given out [2]. A recent study found that 59% of dogs in the UK were overweight or obese [3], with most investigators agreeing that this proportion is on the rise [4].

Previous reports classified dogs as obese when their bodyweight exceeded 30% of the optimal. However evidence for the "optimal" bodyweight is limited, as even within a breed there can be wide variation in body condition [4]. Vets will often classify obesity using a body condition scoring system, which uses visual assessment and palpation to determine which score an animal receives, and this is a tool that can be used by owners [5]. Signs of obesity in the dog include: difficulty seeing or feeling the dog's ribs, spine or waistline; abdominal distension; reluctance to go for walks; excessive panting; and difficulty getting up and down stairs and in and out of vehicles [2].

There are certain factors that increase the likelihood of obesity in dogs including breed, age, neuter status, sex and owner related factors. The predisposition of certain breeds suggests that genetics may play a part in the development of obesity. Neutered dogs are at increased risk of obesity compared to unneutered dogs, due to hormonal changes following neuter that affect metabolism. The risk of obesity, as with humans, increases with age. Dogs become less active as they age and therefore if their food intake is not

decreased proportionally, they will gain weight. Owner related factors, such as decisions on a dog's diet and lifestyle, will also influence a dog's bodyweight [2].

In recent years there has been greater awareness of the need for collaboration between the fields of human and veterinary medicine, termed a 'One Health' approach [1]. Investigating a disease in humans can lead to further understanding of a disease in animals and vice versa. Research into owner's perceptions of obesity in general and factors associated with human and canine obesity revealed that increasing age, poor diet and low physical activity were associated with obesity in both owners and their dogs. Further to this, dog owners who did not consider obesity to be a disease were more likely to have obese dogs [6]. With the origin of the word 'disease' meaning 'lack of ease', obesity fits this criteria.

Issues

Obesity is a serious welfare issue in dogs, as it can cause suffering by promoting other diseases and affect a dog's ability to perform natural behaviours [7]. Problems exacerbated as a result of obesity include diabetes mellitus, heart disease, respiratory distress, high blood pressure, cancers and arthritis [2, 7]. The range of health problems associated with obesity also mean that obesity leads to an overall reduced life expectancy [6]. Obesity makes clinical assessment by a vet more difficult. Techniques more problematic in obese dogs include physical examination, thoracic auscultation (listening to the chest using a stethoscope), abdominal palpation, blood sampling and diagnostic imaging, particularly ultrasonography. Anaesthetic risk is increased in obese dogs, due to problems such as estimating anaesthetic dose and prolonged operating time. Obese animals also have decreased heat tolerance and stamina [4].

In the past, education regarding healthy nutrition or improved awareness of the health risks associated with obesity has not been linked to an improvement in human or canine obesity rates. A major issue recently identified is that between 2% and 49% of owners do not believe obesity to be a disease in dogs. These owners were more likely to have obese dogs, therefore better educational strategies to increase awareness and knowledge about this disease and the ways to combat it are paramount [6]. Similarly, owners of obese dogs tend to underestimate the body condition of their animals [1]. As the

prevalence of obesity rises, owner perceptions of what 'normal' is can become skewed and result in exacerbation of the problem.

DBRG Position

DBRG believes that the high prevalence of obesity in dogs and the resultant health problems from this disease are a major welfare concern. DBRG supports a collaborative approach between the fields of human and animal medicine to help tackle the problem of obesity. Failure of owners to recognise obesity as a disease has contributed to the burden. Therefore, educational strategies to raise awareness of obesity as a disease are crucial and will be promoted by DBRG. Whilst owners are ultimately responsible for the diet and lifestyle of their pets, vets play a vital role in helping to prevent, identify and address obesity in dogs.

DBRG Recommendations

- Educate owners on the health and welfare consequences of canine obesity and emphasise obesity as a disease.
- Support a One Health approach to targeting canine obesity.
- Continued and increased activity by the veterinary profession and welfare charities to warn and educate the general public about the health and welfare issues of obesity.
- Diet and lifestyle factors should be discussed between owners and veterinarians, as well as the effects of neutering, age, sex and breed on the risk of obesity. Dogs should be weighed and body condition scored at every available opportunity.
- Prevent normalisation of overweight and obese dogs by promoting healthy versions of the breed.
- Action by breed clubs and the Kennel Club to ensure only healthy dogs of a normal body condition are presented at shows.

References

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