

BVA, BVNA, BVZS and BEVA policy position on obesity in dogs, cats, horses, donkeys and rabbits

Executive summary

BVA, BVNA, BVZS and BEVA recognise obesity as a serious clinical condition that can cause significant harm to the physiology, health and welfare of all animals. This position statement covers dogs, cats, horses, donkeys and rabbits, as species commonly kept as companion animals in the UK.

Across dogs, cats, horses, donkeys and rabbits, obesity can adversely affect health and welfare by increasing the risk of diseases, causing functional impairment, shortening life span, and reducing overall quality of life.

Under the UK Animal Welfare Acts^{1,2,3}, animal owners and keepers must ensure that they meet the five welfare needs of the animals under their care. These five welfare needs are:

- The need for a suitable environment
- The need for a suitable diet
- The need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- The need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Animal owners and keepers must therefore make sure that the animals in their care receive an appropriate diet, have sufficient opportunities to exercise and express species-specific behaviours, and are protected from any pain, suffering, injury or disease that may result from being overweight or obese.

The veterinary professions, animal owners and keepers, show judges and breeders, breed societies and clubs, animal welfare organisations and marketing professionals, should work together to prevent, manage and increase awareness of obesity in dogs, cats, horses, donkeys and rabbits, as well as promote healthy body images. This can be achieved through:

- Understanding obesity: Cause, risk factors, prevalence and awareness
- Targeted interventions from the veterinary professions to prevent and manage obesity
- Harnessing the influence of the show ring and other animal-related stakeholders
- Responsible marketing and advertising

To achieve this, our specific recommendations are:

Recommendation 1: We support the use of body condition scoring, used alongside the routine monitoring of body weight and physical measurements, to identify, prevent and manage weight gain and the development of obesity in animals.

Recommendation 2: Vets, vet nurses and pet owners should use a body condition scoring system that they can apply consistently and confidently.

Recommendation 3: Obesity should be considered as a legitimate clinical condition and serious health and welfare concern in all animals.

¹Animal Welfare Act 2006 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/45/pdfs/ukpga_20060045_en.pdf

²Animal Health and Welfare Act (Scotland) 2006 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2006/11/contents>

³Welfare of Animals Act (Northern-Ireland) 2011
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2011/16/pdfs/nia_20110016_en.pdf

Recommendation 4: Stakeholders across the pet and horse food industries, veterinary associations and animal welfare organisations should work together to encourage animal owners to understand the importance of animals maintaining a healthy weight, and to actively discuss appropriate ways to manage risk factors for obesity with their veterinary surgeon or vet nurse.

Recommendation 5: Animal owners should be encouraged to monitor their animals' weight and body condition regularly to prevent obesity and allow for early intervention if they become overweight.

Recommendation 6: Vets and vet nurses should use body condition scoring alongside routine monitoring of body weight to prevent and identify the development of obesity.

Recommendation 7: Vets and vet nurses should monitor body condition score and body weight during a puppy or kitten's growth phase to enable weight management and the education of owners about identifying health body condition scores, health weights and feeding practices.

Recommendation 8: Vets and vet nurses should check the body condition score and/or body weight of animals at least once a year, but more frequently if feasible, with details recorded in the clinical records and discuss with owners at each health check. Routine visits for vaccination and preventative healthcare can provide significant opportunities of identifying those animals that are obese. More frequent monitoring of body condition score and body weight is strongly advised in animals that are obese or are at risk of obesity.

Recommendation 9: Vets and vet nurses should regularly explain to owners the health and welfare benefits of maintaining a healthy, mid-range, body condition and emphasise the importance of safe and effective feeding strategies,^{4,5,6,7} dietary enrichment and physical activity. It is paramount that communication around body condition is done in a neutral and supportive manner to avoid stigma and ensure that veterinary care and advice continues to be sought.

Recommendation 10: Small animal veterinary practices should encourage clients to regularly visit their vet or vet nurse to weigh their pets and discuss the importance of a healthy body condition and weight.

Recommendation 11: Veterinary practices should ensure practice policies support staff to appropriately convey evidence-based information and advice about obesity to clients in a timely and supportive manner.

⁴ The WSAVA set out average calorie needs for [dogs](#) and [cats](#) with health body condition scores as part of their [Global Nutritional Guidelines](#).

⁵ Alongside PDSA, BSAVA, BVZS, BVNA, RWF, RSPCA and Wood Green, we recommend the following diet for adult rabbits:

At least their own body size in good quality hay each day (so if you put the daily amount of hay next to your rabbits, it should be at least as big as them). As a rule, either fresh hay or growing grass (not grass clippings) should always be available.

An adult-sized handful of suitable fresh greens morning and evening

Just a tablespoon of rabbit nuggets once daily (or twice daily if the rabbits weigh over 3.5kg).

Don't feed a muesli style diet.

[Read the PDSA feeding rabbits guide in full, co-badged by](#) BSAVA, BVZS, BVNA, RWF, RSPCA and Wood Green.

⁷ For horses, as set out in [The rise in equine obesity](#) and [Equine obesity: Current perspectives](#), limiting access to grazing can be helpful along with reducing hay intake and soaking it to reduce calorie intake whilst maintaining fibre intake. Smaller hay nets, bowls and scoops and weigh feed to ensure intake is accurate is also effective.

In addition, feeding little and often and using measures to slow feed intake such as multiple hay nets and small weave nets can be effective.

BVA BVNA, BVZS and BEVA policy position on obesity in dogs, cats, horses, donkeys and rabbits

Recommendation 12: Veterinary practices should ensure that employees are familiar and confident with using body condition scoring consistently for the species they treat.

Recommendation 13: Veterinary practices should ensure that their marketing materials depict animals with mid-range body conditions, a suitable diet, and a suitable environment to meet their physical needs.

Recommendation 14: Veterinary associations should work together to educate and influence all organisations and stakeholders within the animal sector. This particularly includes breed societies and clubs across species.

Recommendation 15: Veterinary associations should continue to work together to support and harness the influence of the veterinary professions to raise client awareness of the health and welfare implications of obesity, risk factors, and the importance of discussing diet, exercise and weight management with a veterinary surgeon or vet nurse.

Recommendation 16: Veterinary associations should promote the use of body condition scoring of animals amongst vets, vet nurses and animal owners.

Recommendation 17: Veterinary associations should develop 'tool kits' with resources and information to support their members to prevent, manage and communicate with clients about the importance of healthy, mid-range, body conditions.

Recommendation 18: Sustainable weight management programmes should be undertaken under the guidance of a veterinary surgeon or vet nurse. Weight management programmes should be tailored to the individual animal in question and consider any pre-existing health conditions. The honest recording of all food intake, including treats, should be encouraged.

Recommendation 19: Weight management must be undertaken gradually, in a way that ensures that the nutritional needs of the individual animal are met.

Recommendation 20: Food choices for weight management should be decided in consultation with a veterinary surgeon or vet nurse, the choice will depend on the individual health and welfare needs of the animal in question, as well as client preference.

Recommendation 21: In pet animals, dietary enrichment strategies, using tools or toys to mentally stimulate animals and encourage them to express their natural feeding behaviours eg foraging, hunting or grazing behaviour, should be encouraged and discussed with a veterinary surgeon or vet nurse.

Recommendation 22: Choice of physical activity, as well as the frequency and duration required to achieve weight loss, should be decided and monitored in consultation with a veterinary surgeon or vet nurse.

Recommendation 23: Breed standards should ensure that wording and images do not promote the selection of animals with overweight or obese body condition scores or animals with risk factors linked to obesity.

Recommendation 24: Show judges should be trained to body condition score as part of their respective competency frameworks.

Recommendation 25: Show judges should only place dogs, cats, horses, donkeys and rabbits that have a healthy body condition score.

Recommendation 26: The amount of food that animals are shown to be eating in advertising and marketing imagery should be proportionate to their size, dietary needs and lifestage. In practice, this means not showing food bowls full to the brim, overfull or overflowing.

Recommendation 27: Advertisements using animals to promote commercial treats should also ensure that animals are depicted as consuming these treats in moderation, in the wider

BVA BVNA, BVZS and BEVA policy position on obesity in dogs, cats, horses, donkeys and rabbits

context of a balanced, nutritional diet and it should be made clear that these should be consumed in addition to, not in place of, an animal's daily food allowance.

Recommendation 28: Advertisements using animals should ensure that they depict enough indoor and, where relevant, outdoor space for them to move around and exercise freely, as well as exhibit species specific behaviours.

Recommendation 29: Advertisements should avoid the use of overweight or obese animals in their marketing to avoid the normalisation of unhealthy body conditions in dogs, cats and horses.

Recommendation 30: To ensure the depiction of healthy body images, marketing professionals and vets should consult body condition score charts and resources, which will provide visual guides to support their decision-making.