

## ***Ask the Vet: When a Pet Has Unexpected Weight Loss***

**By Craig Selby, DVM – Daisy Hill Animal Hospital, Ltd.**

Veterinarians frequently spend time in discussion with small animal pet owners about strategies to get excessive weight off their pet. Shedding excess weight is the first step to return to a more healthy state. Obesity probably is the most common abnormal exam finding in pets. More than half of pets in America are clinically overweight. When obesity is the problem, controlling food and calories is vital, along with increasing the pet's fitness level to help shed the weight.

However, unexplained weight loss, either chronically throughout months, or suddenly over days, indicates an underlying health concern. Sometimes weight loss is noticed by the pet owner, or it may be found unexpectedly during a wellness care veterinary visit when previous weights are compared. Sudden weight loss more typically is associated with active, more serious illness, and always is very concerning.

When pets lose weight during a planned treatment for obesity, the loss of the excessive fat stores is expected. A good plan promotes an increase in muscle mass and fitness. But unhealthy weight loss due to a poor plan or an underlying medical condition results in undesirable muscle mass loss.

Now, please don't bother asking "Dr. Google" for advice, as there are so many different, potentially confusing causes of weight loss. A starting point is to talk with your veterinarian to help identify the reasons for your pet's weight loss, and determine the best course of action. A discussion of lifestyle and diet and physical examination helps to reduce the list of possible causes. The use of diagnostic tests chosen based on the suspicions help to confirm a diagnosis.

Oral or dental disease sometimes changes eating patterns through either discomfort or underlying neuromuscular disease. Identifying and treating dental disease early is crucial. As pets age, active oral disease subsequently can lead to other systemic problems and organ failures. Occasionally, swallowing difficulty or esophagus malfunction is found.

The stomach can be the source of illness, or other systemic diseases can cause the stomach to function poorly. If there is gastritis or inflammation present, then vomiting often is part of the history. Ulcerations, infection, decreased function and full or partial obstructions of the stomach may result from dietary indiscretion, inflammation or growth.

Veterinarians frequently diagnose problems with the GI tract due to a wide variety of causes. Sometimes intestinal parasites are causing chronic inflammation and can be identified with a parasite test. Chronic intestinal inflammation can lead to poor digestion or malabsorption of nutrients. This may be caused by the pet's overzealous immune system or by sensitivity to a particular diet. Liver or pancreatic organ diseases also are relatively common causes.

Laboratory testing can help identify a cause for weight loss due to renal, or kidney, insufficiency, which is seen as a common source of weight loss in older pets, especially cats. Identifying kidney disease early is best for slowing its progression. Blood tests and urine also are useful in identifying diabetes, thyroid abnormalities and endocrine disorders.

Comparison of physical exam findings identify whether underlying heart disease is present, which may be associated with a loss of appetite and activity. Heartworm infection in both dogs and cats can lead to weight loss and other subsequent signs of poor health. And, I have seen on more than one occasion a pet that is not eating well because of a flea infestation and associated misery of skin disease.

As pets age, we often notice a little weight loss associated with decreased muscle tone due to decreased activity. We encourage that all older pets maintain regular activity and exercise. Good physical fitness also can reduce the impact of osteoarthritis that slows the appetite of some pets. Unfortunately, we cannot forget about the possibility of cancer or tumor development causing a physical or medical problem. If identified early enough, the potential for beneficial treatment is greater.

Non-medical causes of appetite loss and subsequent weight loss include changes in social stresses or development of anxieties. Situations like a recent move, depression from an owner loss or companion pet loss, addition of a new pet, or other environmental anxieties may exist and sometimes are difficult to identify.

Also, the diet itself can be to blame. From insufficient calories being fed (or another pet taking more than their share), to a change in diet brand or type to a food having an undesirable taste or texture are problems that are relatively simple to fix. However, the lack of a well-balanced diet may be to blame, and is most commonly seen with the use of a homemade or raw food diet when the recipe is inadequately constructed. Switching to, or supplementing with, a complete and balanced commercial diet often is recommended in these situations.

If you are suspicious of any unexpected weight loss in your pet, your veterinary team is the best trained resource for identifying the potential cause, and for determining the best course of action to help your pet.