



Was Tabby Toby Too Tubby?

Helping clients keep pets' obesity in check.

by Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD & John L. Meyer, PhD

When Mrs. Rankin reached the Rosewood Veterinary Clinic, she was not in one of her best moods. She had been fighting a cold all week and had a bit of a sore throat. The traffic on the highway had been terrible. And to make matters worse, for some reason, it had been a struggle to convince her pet cat, Toby, that it was time for his annual check up.

But she knew the Rosewood Clinic well and never missed an appointment. She had been a regular visitor with her pet cat as well as her dog — either when they were sick or for their regular check ups which had usually involved inoculations. On this day, to add to her frustrations, she had an unusually long wait in the waiting room due to an emergency to which the veterinarian had to attend.

Finally, she was called, and handed Toby over to veterinarian Dr. Tom Hastings, who remembered Mrs. Rankin and Toby. To her surprise, the first thing he said was, “Toby, my good friend, what has happened to you? You’ve put on some pounds, you little fat cat!”

Mrs. Rankin was taken aback. Being quite overweight herself, she was particularly sensitive to references of weight and hated to see the concern about weight now being addressed to her cat. And, after such a long wait, she was not happy to be greeted with such a blunt evaluation.

“My cat is *not* overweight,” responded Mrs. Rankin emphatically. “He’s healthy and happy, that’s all.”



People will defend their pets —
especially if that defense is also of them.

“Excuse me,” the veterinarian replied, defending himself, “but Toby has gotten quite tubby since I saw him last.” And with a twinkle in his eye, he said, “I really didn’t recognize him at first!”

“Well, I resent all this talk about weight all the time. I’m always told I’m overweight, but I think it’s just the way I’m built. That is probably the same for Toby. He’s healthy and happy, and that’s the way he’s grown,” she snapped.

“Sorry,” Dr. Hastings replied. “I didn’t mean anything offensive. As your

continued



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veterinarian I must, however, be concerned about your pet’s weight, as a part of my concern about his overall health.” Then, hoping to move the visit along, Dr. Hastings said, “Let’s just put Toby on the scale and see what the records show.”

“I don’t care what your scale says,” Mrs. Rankin rebutted. “My cat is what he is, and you should never say he’s overweight!”

Dr. Hastings persisted. “Well, let’s just weigh him and check his chart from our last session and see how much weight he has gained,” the Dr. said calmly. “I also want to compare him with recommended weight for this age and size of cat. We can see where he sits in the recommended range.”

“Why?” Mrs. Rankin shrieked. “You have already decided that Toby is too fat!” Losing patience with her, Dr. Hastings said sternly, “Mrs. Rankin, do you want the facts or don’t you? Let’s weigh your cat and let the facts speak for themselves.”

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Mrs. Rankin retorted, in an elevated voice, her face growing red. "Doctor Hastings, I can't stay. I don't think you are going to be objective. I want to take Toby home." With that, she picked up Toby and walked out of Dr. Hastings' office, through the waiting room and out to her car.

The Dr. was astonished. Before he realized how serious she was, he saw his client walk out the door with her cat! "Where did all of this go so wrong?" he wondered.

Respond to concerns

by John L. Meyer, Ph.D.

Dr. Hastings' visit with Mrs. Rankin might have gone smoothly if Dr. Hastings had remembered the importance of taking time to greet his pet owner and engage in a bit of initial socializing. "How are you and Toby doing today? This practice enables the doctor to assess the mood of his customer and pet.

It also, in this case, would have given Mrs. Rankin a chance to vent her frustration over the long wait and other annoyances of the morning. With this knowledge, he might have decided to downplay his usual blunt but good-natured greeting, or, at least, he would have been better prepared for his client's reactions.

Had he followed the opening pleasantries with an explanation of the annual check-up routine, Mrs. Rankin might have seen the weight check as a part of the overall examination of Toby's health. Sensitivity to the bond between pet and owner should never, of course, go overlooked. If the doctor is suspicious that he will find Toby to be overweight and has observed the owner to be also overweight, he might be particularly alert. People will defend their pets — especially if that defense is also of them.

Perhaps a different vocabulary is necessary. In the interrogative, it might be more euphemistic to inquire, "Has Toby gained any weight since we last met? Ineffective as that sounds, even that

could be a bit risky. Perhaps it would be better to just weigh the animal and record it on the chart, silently noting the numerical difference between pre- and present weights, without comment.

So how then can we break the news about the prevalent problem of overweight pets? Perhaps it can be best "handled with care" by putting it into a context. Starting with the good health characteristics of the pet and then gradually turning to the problem of over weight (not ignoring obesity's seriousness and consequences.

Discussions on the subject of obesity might begin with questions on good appetite and diet, for example. "How is Toby's appetite these days?" "How well is he eating?" Have you put him on a diet?" etc.

When it comes to addressing a pet's weight, the veterinarian will also be wise to remember that what doctors see as a medical concern about weight is often seen by others as simply a popular cultural notion that "slim is in" and that "fat" or even "chubby" is an insult.. In this case, the insult was shared by pet AND pet owner, even though an insult to neither was intended.

Mrs. Rankin gave all the body-language signs of being upset. She continued to raise her voice and even her face reddened as she spoke. When such is the case, it would be more appropriate for the veterinarian to back away from the troubling topic, take time to point out the positive results of the check-up and approach the weight issue as part of the many metrics that have to be reviewed. If, on the other hand, the doctor senses that the client's bad day is not going to allow her to proceed objectively, it would be more appropriate for him to suggest a postponement and schedule a follow-up appointment. ■

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