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# Treat pet obesity as a disease, prevent it with communication

One veterinarian calls for clearer feeding guidance, stronger explanations of weight-management nutrition and earlier conversations with pet owners.

**BY TIM WALL**

Pet food companies can improve obesity communication by explaining weight-management formulations and reaching owners before weight gain begins, according to veterinarian Ernie Ward, founder of the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP) and the World Pet Obesity Association.

"The biggest gap is that the industry still sells pet obesity as a lifestyle choice instead of a disease," Ward said. "That shows up in what it says, what it formulates and when it steps in."

Ward would start by moving obesity messaging beyond portions and willpower. APOP's 2025 survey illustrates the difficulty owners face: Among owners who reported attempting weight loss for their pets, 28% said their dogs reached a healthy target weight, and 19% said their cats did.

"A disease gets a diagnosis, plan and follow-up," Ward said.

Brands may help address this difficulty by connecting product information with practical feeding instructions, veterinary support and follow-up across packaging, advertising and other customer communication.



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## Give owners a clear action and usable numbers

Ward recommended changing the tone and substance of obesity messages.

"The 2026 Pet Obesity Communication Guidelines show how to say it precisely and respectfully: use pet-first language (a dog with obesity, not an obese dog), no 'chonky' jokes and include a veterinary body condition check as the call to action," Ward said. "Then give numbers. Treats should make up no more than about 10% of the day's calories, and that 10% comes out of the daily total rather than adding to it; for a 50-pound dog, that is roughly 110 calories, or two or three medium biscuits."

Ward wants that level of detail to become standard. Packaging can put the advice into practice by placing calories per treat beside feeding directions and explaining how rewards fit within the daily allowance. His example is illustrative; individual pets' energy needs and calories per biscuit vary. Websites and retailer materials can reinforce those calorie calculations.

A pet food brand's social posts, influencer briefs and customer service responses should support the same health message. A campaign encouraging owners to give treats as rewards can include portion guidance and alternative rewards, such as play and attention.

According to research results published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 58% of 561 surveyed veterinarians identified direct but compassionate conversations as a potential solution to nutrition communication barriers (O'Brien *et al*., 2026). However, the study measured professional perceptions, not whether particular messages produced weight loss.

## Explain what weight-management nutrition does

Ward also wants companies to explain formulation and evaluate results.

"Formulation is the underappreciated half of weight loss," he said. "Cutting calories alone causes the pet to lose muscle along with fat; the protein and fiber in each calorie help protect muscle and keep the pet full. The question isn't 'How much weight did the pet lose?' but 'Where did the pet lose weight?' Judge a weight management food by body condition and muscle kept at 12 months, not pounds lost at 12 weeks."

Muscle loss is a risk during calorie restriction, rather than an inevitable outcome. American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) guidelines stated that higher-protein diets can help preserve lean mass and that protein and added fiber can promote satiety.

These benefits depend on the diet and feeding plan.

For communication teams, that means explaining how a food supplies nutrients within a prescribed calorie allowance and identifying the outcomes actually measured in product research. A claim about preserving muscle needs supporting evidence. Pounds lost alone do not establish whether muscle or fat was lost. Ward proposed a 12-month evaluation benchmark.

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## Separate product information from diagnosis

On excess body fat and clinical obesity, Ward separates product descriptions from diagnosis.

"The simplest way to keep excess body fat and clinical obesity separate is to develop and market products for excess body fat, which can be described on a package, and leave the diagnosis of clinical obesity to veterinarians," he said.

"A body condition score can tell you whether a dog or cat is carrying excess body fat," Ward said. "Clinical obesity means that excess fat is now contributing to disease, impaired function or another meaningful health problem."

Ward described a proposed veterinary classification distinguishing preclinical from clinical obesity. APOP's guidelines acknowledged that the framework has not been prospectively validated in dogs or cats and is not an internationally adopted veterinary diagnostic standard.

"Obesity has two clinical stages, and they change the purpose and the pace of care," Ward said. "Preclinical obesity is too much body fat with no harm identified yet. The purpose is to prevent disease from developing, and the pace can be steady. Clinical obesity is too much fat plus an attributed complication, such as arthritis, diabetes or other functional limitations. The purpose is to treat a disease; the pace is as quickly as safely possible, and complications are treated at the same time.

"Treat the obesity first, and the complications often improve in both pets and people," he said. "That is why the diagnosis stays with the veterinarian and why the diet has to work at both stages."

Packaging and educational materials can invite owners to request body condition, muscle condition and health assessments. Marketing claims should identify what the evidence establishes, without equating a body condition score or photograph with a diagnosis of related illness.

"And that is where dietary formulation matters," Ward said. "A pet being treated for preclinical or clinical obesity needs reduced energy intake and optimal protein. A complete-and-balanced maintenance food simply cannot deliver both; reduce the portion, and you reduce the protein with it. A therapeutic weight-loss diet puts more protein and fiber into every calorie, so the pet loses fat, keeps muscle and still feels full."

AAHA guidance is more qualified about diet selection: Therapeutic weight-loss diets are recommended for significant calorie restriction to help avoid nutrient deficiencies. Whether a maintenance food supplies adequate nutrients depends on its formulation and prescribed intake.

Ward also expects future obesity drugs to supplement dietary treatment. Medication itself is not new to this field: The FDA approved dirlotapide, marketed as Slentrol for canine obesity in December 2006 His expectations about future treatments should be distinguished from established treatment protocols.




*Tim Wall* / DALL-E

## Reach owners before weight gain becomes established

Ward wants manufacturers to address changing nutritional needs earlier.

"Weight gain often starts during what I call the 'nutritional gap year,' the period after a spay or neuter, when a pet transitions from a growth formula to adult food just as its energy needs decline," Ward said. "We're beginning to see diets specially formulated for this stage, but we need more awareness and solutions."

Companies can connect transition instructions, retailer education and opt-in reminders with a prompt to review feeding amounts after spaying or neutering. Advice about switching formulas should account for the pet's development and body condition.

Practical tools offer another opportunity. A pilot study funded by Nestlé Purina PetCare and published in Frontiers in Veterinary Science sent health packs to 78 dog owners, with 49 completing follow-up (Webb *et al*., 2025). The packs included treat calorie information and progress journals. The uncontrolled, owner-reported study supports further testing but does not establish effectiveness.

APOPs communication guidelines recommended checking whether intended readers can explain a message and its next step. Manufacturers can apply that test to packages, feeding calculators and follow-up materials, then revise what owners struggle to understand or use.

**"Call obesity a disease, and the rest follows,"** Ward said. **"The industry engages with these pets twice a day. No one else gets that many chances to get it right."**

**Bibliography**

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