



ST JOHN'S VETERINARY SURGERY

BERKHAMSTED

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NEWS

Veterinary Surgeons

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Keeping your pet in shape



We are all too aware of the epidemic of obesity facing humans in developed countries, but what about our pets?

With obesity becoming increasingly common, it is a good idea to look objectively at your pets and see if they are overweight or not. Run your hands over their chest – you should be able to easily feel (but not see) their ribs without pressing too hard. They should also have a “waist”, when viewed from both above and the side. By contrast, if you can pinch an inch or more, and if your pet's stomach sags down and bulges out, then a diet may be in order.

The big issue is that carrying extra weight can lead to a range of health risks including:-

- **Arthritis:** if joints are under constant strain from extra weight, they are more likely to become arthritic and painful.
- **Diabetes:** for cats, being obese is a huge risk factor for them developing diabetes.
- **Heart disease:** excess body fat puts the heart under increased strain and can hasten the onset of heart failure, especially in ‘at risk’ breeds.

How can you ensure your pet stays at the right weight?

The most important thing is to ensure their diet is one suitable for them and their lifestyle. Neutered pets tend to have a slower metabolism and so can be more prone to weight gain and there are now several foods on the market that are formulated specifically for them. Some breeds are more vulnerable to being overweight, Labradors for example, and both breed and ‘type’ tailored diets are available. Indoor cats will be much more sedentary than outdoor ones and diets exist that take this into account. Also, don't forget to limit the amount of treats they have!

So - how can you help a pet lose weight? Firstly, there are many different ‘light’ diets on the market which will keep your pets just as full but lower their calorie intake. Secondly, all pets need regular exercise – and increased walks, more frequent play, or increased access to outdoors are all part of the answer. Additionally make them work for their dinner using puzzle toys and at the same time keep them entertained for hours. The good news is that as your pet loses weight,

the benefits of increased healthiness and vitality are usually seen quite quickly. So, if you think your pet has been piling on the pounds please get in touch – we are here to help!



Cat photo: Warren Photographic.



Some pets will eat anything!



Staying on the subject of things that pets like to eat, some pets unfortunately love snacking on a wide variety of everyday items that end up stuck in their stomach or small intestines.

Cats, and particularly kittens, are very keen on swallowing tinsel at Christmas, wool and other stringy objects (often with needles attached as well!). These almost invariably get stuck in their small intestines and require surgery to remove them.

Dogs seem to delight in eating socks, children's toys - the list is huge! Unfortunately many of these objects, once swallowed, will require surgery to remove them.

So – as well as trying to ensure your pets don't eat these objects, we strongly recommend **pet insurance** to cover you against these unexpected eventualities!



A very expensive sock that was removed from the intestines of a dog

Caring for your older cat – some top tips!



In their twilight years our cats can suffer from a range of conditions, but they are also experts at hiding the signs of illness! So, looking out for subtle changes in their behaviour can really make a difference. Here are some tips:

Sore joints: Recent studies have shown that approximately 80% of cats over the age of twelve have arthritis. However, it can be difficult to identify because they simply rest more, and because they are naturally athletic animals, they will often still jump, climb and play, but not as much as they

used to. Ask us to check their joints next time you are paying us a visit, and if we are concerned, a trial of pain relief medication often lets us know if they are sore or not. Make a stiff, elderly cat's life easier by placing steps up to their favourite places, putting food bowls close to where they rest, using low sided litter trays and giving them deep, soft beds in warm, cosy places.

Weight loss: Senior cats can lose weight due to many different conditions, but often it is such a gradual process we don't notice. It's a good idea to get into the habit of weighing your pensionable pussycat on a regular basis and if you notice a downward trend, bring them in for a check-up.

Drinking more: Kidney Failure and Diabetes are fairly common in older cats and both will cause them to drink more than they should. In fact, cats naturally drink very little, so often a cat who drinks 'well', is actually drinking to excess and should have a check-up.



Eating less: Sore teeth and Kidney Failure are two of the most likely causes of a reduced or changed appetite in a cat. If their mouth is painful they often keep eating, but they may start to prefer wet food or, if watched carefully, not actually chew properly. It can be difficult to fully check their mouths at home, so if you are worried, just bring them down!

Eating more: An over-active thyroid gland (Hyperthyroidism) and Diabetes will both make cats eat more, and while this is often taken as a sign of good health, it can be the opposite, especially if they are losing weight *despite* their appetite.

So – as you can see there are a lot of signs to keep a watchful eye out for. In addition it's also a good idea to bring older pets in for regular health-checks so that any problems can be picked up as early as possible.

Rabbit teeth – a growing issue!



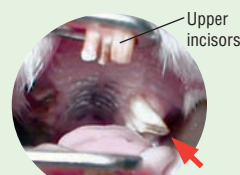
Did you know that rabbits have unusual teeth in that they are *continually* growing? In fact their teeth are perfectly adapted to their natural diet of tough abrasive vegetation, which – without continued tooth growth, would soon result in their teeth being totally ground down to nothing!

Thus, to keep our pet bunny's teeth healthy, most of their diet should comprise of good quality hay (which is very abrasive), a small amount of fresh green leafy vegetables, and a small amount of a pelleted rabbit feed. This keeps their teeth at a healthy (short) length plus also getting all the vital nutrition they need.

However it is easy to feed too much hard food (often of the muesli kind), which bunnies often prefer, and so ignore the hay. Insufficient hay means the teeth aren't ground down and so grow too long, developing sharp spikes which tear into the mouth (see photo). Muesli type mixes also encourage *selective* feeding, leaving vital nutrients uneaten and which can lead to bone weakness. For this reason, it is better to replace the muesli mix component with pelleted food.

The good news is that feeding the correct diet, as outlined above, can go a long way to avoiding most dental problems in rabbits. For more advice, please have a chat to our team who will be very happy to advise you!

Oral exam reveals problems:



Overgrown cheek teeth (arrowed) are sharp, spikey and can lacerate the gums



Lungworm alert!

Lungworm, caused by *Angiostrongylus vasorum* is gradually becoming more common through-out the UK and Ireland. In affected dogs, clinical signs can range from a mild cough to life threatening bleeding problems.



Slugs and snails can carry the larval stage of *Angiostrongylus vasorum* and if dogs eat slugs and snails, they can become unwittingly infected. Some pets seem to have a taste for these garden dwellers but all dogs are at risk. Some species of slugs are very small and can easily be accidentally swallowed when dogs eat grass, drink from puddles or play with toys that have been left outside. The disease is commonest in young dogs that eat or play with slugs and snails.

Once swallowed, the larvae migrate to the heart where they will develop into adult



Electron micrograph of an adult lungworm

worms. The adult lungworms live in the heart and those blood vessels supplying the lungs. Here they lay their eggs, which hatch into larvae and migrate into the airways of the lungs. The dog then coughs them up, swallows the larvae, sheds them in the faeces, and the life cycle begins again.

Clinical signs of lungworm can be vague and variable – ranging from a cough or tiring more easily, to bruising easily, serious bleeding problems and even fitting.

Lungworm can be diagnosed by checking for the larvae in the faeces or by specialised blood tests. The treatment for dogs who are infected with a lungworm involves killing the parasites plus also treating the bleeding or other symptoms they may have. The latter can be challenging and, sadly, many dogs have died because of the parasite.

The good news is that prevention is straight forward with spot-on or tablet medications, both of which are highly effective.

If you are concerned about lungworm, please have a chat to our staff who will be able to advise you on the best form of preventative treatment to protect your pets.