

Abnormal Body Condition

# Unexplained Weight Loss



Weight loss occurs when caloric intake does not meet energy needs. Weight loss can be seen secondary to many diseases, e.g., chronic heart failure or kidney disease, endocrine disease, gastrointestinal conditions, liver disease, or neoplasia. However, if the history, exam, and diagnostics all exclude a medical cause, weight loss could be driven by increased metabolic energy needs or decreased consumption. Recognizing the underlying issue and instituting targeted nutrition can help the pet regain a healthy weight and body condition, which promotes optimal health and longevity.

## Key Messages

- Routine nutritional assessments that include body weight, body condition scoring, and muscle condition scoring aid in early identification of unintended weight loss.
- If the cause of weight loss remains unexplained after exam and diagnostics:
  - Revisit the pet's diet history – has the owner switched the pet to a lower calorie (“light”) diet (thus, feeding the same amount would provide fewer calories) or to a diet that is nutritionally inadequate for the pet's life stage?
  - Is the pet being fed enough of the current diet to meet current caloric needs?
    - Senior cats may lose weight once they enter their geriatric years around age 12. Weight loss may be caused by a reduced ability to digest fat and protein and other metabolic changes.
    - A change in activity, lifestyle, or environment can affect calorie requirements. Also consider that energy needs may not be consistent year-round, e.g., some dogs may be more active during the summer months.
  - Has the pet's appetite decreased?
    - Senior pets may have a decreased appetite due to an age-related reduction in the sense of smell and taste.
    - Consider behavioral causes, e.g., stress or, in a multi-pet household, competition for food (e.g., one pet is blocking a housemate's access to the food bowl).
    - Has the pet become a picky eater?
- Diet and feeding management strategies can help the pet regain a healthy weight and body condition:
  - Estimate the pet's daily calorie needs. Ensure that the owner measures food using a gram scale or measuring cup.

- Add calories to the diet by recommending an energy-dense, nutrient-dense, highly palatable food (e.g., growth or performance diet, therapeutic critical care diet, or, for dogs, cat food). This helps a pet gain weight while maintaining or rebuilding lean body mass.
- More frequent feeding provides more opportunities for the pet to eat and helps ensure the food is always fresh.
- For pets with a decreased appetite:
  - Warming of the food to body temperature can help enhance aroma and taste to encourage appetite.
  - If the pet usually eats dry food, moistening the kibble or adding/switching to wet food may encourage eating. Flavor enhancers may also help.
  - To eliminate competition in multi-pet households, pets should be fed separately.
  - Pets should be fed in a noise-free, stress-free environment.
  - Provided that it doesn't cause stress, the owner can try calmly encouraging the pet to eat.
  - For cats in particular, food should be offered in different types of bowls to determine if the cat has developed a preference. Some cats prefer wide and shallow bowls so that their whiskers do not touch the sides of the bowl.
- Monitor to ensure the pet reaches ideal body condition and weight. Once the pet reaches this milestone, calculate energy requirements for maintenance.
- Encourage activity to maintain lean body mass.

The Purina Institute aims to help put nutrition at the forefront of pet health discussions by providing user-friendly, science-based information that helps pets live longer, healthier lives.

