Caring practices of pet cat and dog owners in Northern Ireland vs potential implications for animals’ health and welfare

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Abstract

This prospective, descriptive study assessed caring practices of pet cat and dog owners in Northern Ireland with a survey questionnaire, focusing primarily on feeding and exercising. Owners of both pet cats and dogs reported that they fed their pets either twice or three times a day (53 and 78% for cats and dogs, respectively). However, in the case of nearly 40% of pet cat owners it transpired that they fed their cat(s) as often as the animal demanded (18.8%) or that food was available all the time (20.7%). Cat owners reported that their pets had access to outdoors (84%) and were not provided with any play time (53.1%). The highest number of pet dogs (46.1%) were reported as being walked daily for less than 1 h, and the highest number (38.4%) were played with daily for less than 1 h. Both cat (60%) and dog (61%) owners perceived the body condition of their animal ‘as it should be’ for animal age/sex. However, both pet cat (76%) and dog (63%) owners reported that neither their pet’s bodyweight nor its body condition was monitored. Our results suggest not all pet cat and dog owners are aware of the fundamentals of their animals’ feeding requirements as regards health and many provide insufficient physical activity required for their animals’ health and welfare. The major strengths of the study include the size and geographic distribution of the study population allowing the generalisation of the results to other locations.

Keywords: animal welfare, body condition, exercise, feeding pattern, pet cat welfare, pet dog welfare

Introduction

Excessive accumulation of fat in adipose tissue in the body, commonly termed as obesity, results from a positive energy balance, i.e. energy intake that is higher than required for maintenance/stage of development/physiological status and a given level of physical activity (Studdert et al 2012; Okada et al 2017). In pets, as in humans, obesity has been shown to either directly result in or be associated with numerous diseases and a shortened lifespan (Chandler et al 2017; Teng et al 2018; Salt et al 2019). Hence, obesity prevention and a modification of care for weight loss in overweight/obese companion animals are of importance in the current obesogenic environment.

From a physiological point of view, obesity prevention in pets should be considered as a gold health and welfare standard as: i) the energy balance in general terms shows much stronger opposition to weight loss than weight gain (Hill et al 2012); and ii) a healthy bodyweight in pets, resulting from energy intake being matched with energy expenditure, is readily achievable since owners can manage their pets’ energy intake (via feed intake) as well as energy expenditure (via physical activity). However, reported incidences of obesity in pet cats and dogs are high. For cats, reported incidence of obesity varies from ~11% to as high as 52% (Lund et al 2005; Hill 2009; Courcier et al 2010a, 2012; Cave et al 2012; Corbee 2014), while in dogs it ranges from ~20% to as high as ~60% (McGreevy et al 2005; Lund et al 2006; Hill 2009; Courcier et al 2010b; Corbee 2013; Mao et al 2013). Moreover, the results of a recent survey of pet owners in the UK carried out by The People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals in their PAW report (PDSA 2017) indicate an inability of pet owners to recognise obesity in their pets. The PAW report (PDSA 2017) showed that only ~17% (out of 2,076 surveyed) of pet cat owners responded that their cat was overweight/obese, albeit ~50% of the respondents matched images of Body Condition Scores (BCS) of overweight/obese animals to their cats. Furthermore, according to the PAW report (PDSA 2017) for dogs, the discrepancy between the owners’ perceived body condition of their pets and their revised opinion, with the help of BCS images was not high, with only 15% of pet dog owners (out of 1,814 surveyed) stating their dog to be overweight/obese, compared to ~18% of owners who matched images of BCS of overweight/obese animal to their dog’s current body shape. Similar misclassification of animal body condition has been reported in horse owners in Scotland (Wyse et al 2008). Furthermore, other PAW report results (PDSA 2017) for the UK indicate that...