Don't let your pet pack on the pounds

By Lisa Bloch

We all know that being severely overweight is dangerous. From stress on our joints to increased risk of heart disease and stroke, being obese is a serious medical issue. But when it comes to our pets, why do we often think it's "cute" to see a fat feline or corpulent canine?

At his last checkup, my cat, Mischief, weighed in at 18 pounds. I knew he was a big boy and would steal his sister's food, but I didn't realize I was putting his health at risk by helping him pack on the pounds. The veterinarian gave me a stern — and much deserved — talking to about how his weight can seriously affect his health.

Mischief is far from alone in his plumpness. Pet obesity has been on the rise in the United States in the past few decades. According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, roughly 53% of dogs and 58% of cats in the United States are overweight or obese. And more than 90% of guardians did not recognize that their obese pets weighed more than they should.

Just like humans, being severely overweight can lead to various health problems for pets. It can increase the risk of chronic diseases among cats and dogs, such as diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, and various respiratory diseases.

So, why are our pets getting so rotund? Well, for one, if they love to eat — like Mischief — it just feels good to give them something that provides such joy. Mischief races to the food bowl — the only time he runs fast — purring loudly in anticipation of his next meal. Seeing his pleasure gives me pleasure. What I finally learned, however, is that it's important to give him the right food and the right amount. Despite his noisy begging, I know he doesn't need it, so I've been trying to practice a bit of tough love.

There are many options for nutritious, low-calorie pet food specifically designed for overweight pets. You may also want to try wet food, as the extra water may fill your pet's tummy more quickly.

The same goes for those treats. Who doesn't love giving a treat to a dog that's sitting nicely and looking up at you with imploring eyes? Well, just like with us, all those little extra treats add up, so it's important to watch the amount and type of treats carefully.

Another reason pets are packing on the pounds is a familiar one — not enough exercise. While keeping kitties indoors is critical in protecting them from many dangers, it can lead to a more

sedentary lifestyle. But just because your indoor kitty can't climb a tree doesn't mean they can't climb a "cat tree" in your home, chase toys, or play with you.

And walking your dog does not mean a walk around the block. Almost all dogs, unless they are very old or injured in some way, can comfortably walk long distances. And with so many wonderful walking and hiking trails in Marin, there's really no excuse not to take your dog with you. Similarly, a dog left in the backyard all day is not likely to run around on their own for the fun of it.

Lastly, if your pet is overweight and you're having trouble getting them to shed those pounds, you may want to ask your veterinarian for a blood test to check your pet's thyroid hormones. Hypothyroidism can cause obesity, but luckily, it's easily treated with medication.

So help your pet shed some weight so you can both enjoy a healthier life together.

Lisa Bloch is the marketing and communications director for Marin Humane, which contributes Tails of Marin articles and welcomes animal-related questions and stories about the people and animals in our community. Visit marinhumane.org, find us on social media @marinhumane, or email lbloch@marinhumane.org