

# Obesity Report

2020 HEALTHY PETS HEALTHY FAMILIES INITIATIVE



## Mission

To use the connections between human and animal health in order to promote a healthy community

## Vision



Healthy people and pets in healthy communities

## Healthy Pets Lead to Healthier Families

One Health is the integrative effort of multiple fields working together to improve health for people, animals, and the environment.<sup>1</sup> In order to help Los Angeles (LA) County communities implement One Health locally, the Veterinary Public Health Program (VPH) of the LA County Department of Public Health (DPH) created the 2020 Healthy Pets Healthy Families initiative (HPHF). Pets are a part of the family and an integral aspect of HPHF is to foster healthy practices in both two-legged and four-legged residents of LA County.

In 2011, the HPHF Coalition was formed, identifying seven focus areas to promote health in humans and animals. With the help of active community partners, goals were established for each focus area and published in an initial community report “Healthy Pets Healthy Families”,<sup>2</sup> available online at: <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/docs/2014HPHFCommunityReport.pdf>.

### The Seven HPHF Focus Areas

-  **1. Spay and Neuter**
-  **2. Bite Prevention**
-  **3. Vaccine-Preventable Diseases**
-  **4. Obesity Prevention**
-  **5. Secondhand Smoke**
-  **6. Disaster Preparedness and Pets**
-  **7. Zoonoses & Parasite Prevention**

This document explores the relationships between obesity in pets and humans in LA County. It is the first of seven focus area reports highlighting local data and recommendations to help improve health markers for each of the focus areas.

## Obesity – A Growing Concern in Both People and Pets

In the United States, more than one-third of adults are considered obese<sup>3</sup>, defined as a Body Mass Index (BMI) of above 30.<sup>4</sup> In pets, an estimated one-fourth of dogs and two-thirds of cats in the country are considered overweight or obese.<sup>5</sup> Obesity trends in companion animals (pets) appear to mirror what is seen in their owners. In addition, obesity in pets and people



can lead to similar health problems, such as diabetes, arthritis and heart disease.<sup>3,5</sup>

As with humans, evaluating a pet’s condition is not solely based on weight. Because dogs and cats can vary naturally in size, smaller breeds will normally weigh less than larger ones.

To account for breed differences, veterinarians assess dog and cat weight using the Body Condition Score (BCS) system.<sup>6</sup> This method uses physical characteristics of pets to determine if they are under-, over- or ideal weight. In a dog or cat of ideal weight, the waist and abdominal tuck should be observed and one should be able to easily feel the ribs of the animal without excess fat covering.<sup>6</sup>

## Obesity in LA County – Data from Local Surveys

In 2012, VPH conducted a survey of LA County veterinarians on pet obesity.<sup>7</sup> Of the 129 veterinarians who responded, 48% believed that over half of the pets seen in their practice are overweight. This is consistent with the national trends of obesity in pets,<sup>5,8</sup> indicating a widespread issue. Local obesity numbers in people are strikingly similar to those of pets. The 2009 California Health Interview survey, conducted by the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), found that 56% of adults in LA County were overweight or obese.<sup>9</sup>



### Barriers to Losing Weight in Pets

In 2011, a VPH survey of 569 dog owners in LA County<sup>7</sup> revealed three main potential causes of dogs being overweight: 1) owners not recognizing their dog is overweight, 2) lack of physical activity and 3) free-feeding (i.e. leaving food available at all times) (**Table 1**). Although almost half (46%) of survey respondents could not easily feel the ribs of their dog, 85% of them did not believe that their dog was overweight. In addition, the majority (73%) of owners reported leaving a bowl of food available for their dog all the time (i.e. free feeding). Because many animals will overeat if given the opportunity, free feeding may lead to overfeeding, which can be a significant cause for obesity in pets. Lastly, less than half (43%) of dog owners walked their dog daily.

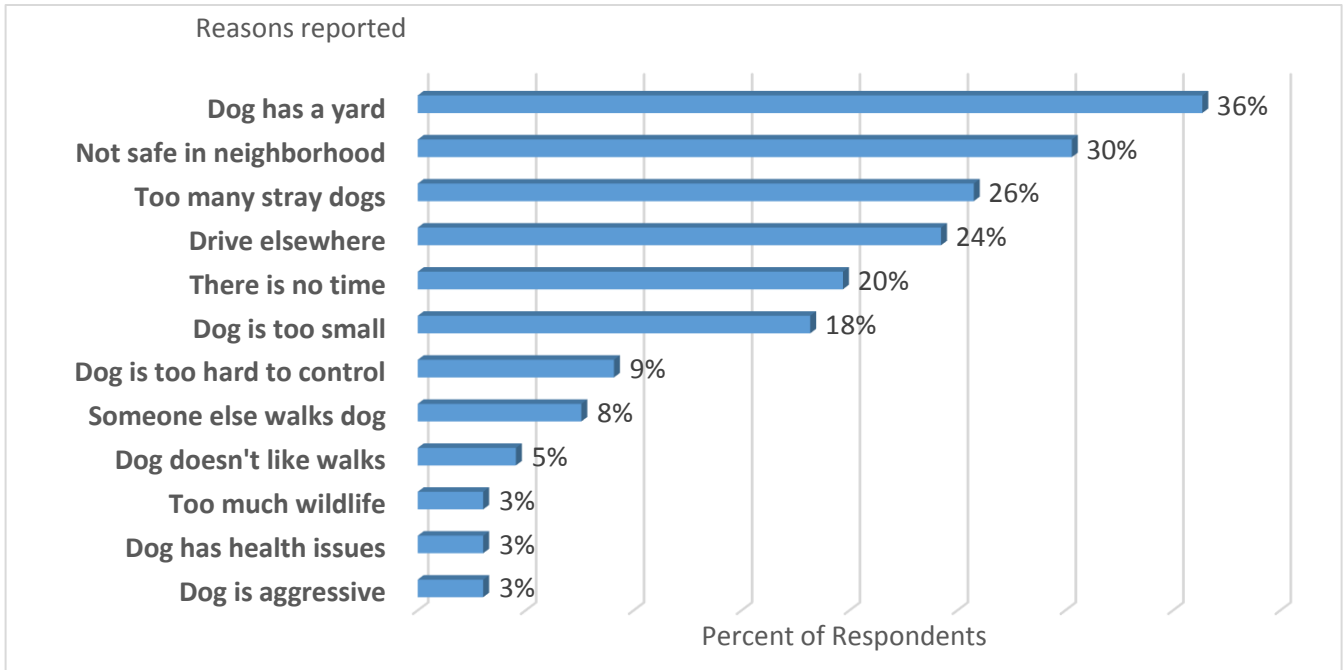
**Table 1: 2011 VPH Survey of pet owners assessing their knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding pet obesity.**

<b>Do you have a bowl of food available for your dog indoors all the time (i.e., free feeding)?</b>	<b>Number (n=569)</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	414	73%
No	142	25%
No response	13	2%
<b>Can you feel the ribs of your dog?</b>		
Yes	277	49%
No	263	46%
No response	29	5%
<b>Do you think your dog is overweight?</b>		
Yes	60	11%
No	481	85%
No response	28	5%
<b>How often do you walk your dog?</b>		
Never	16	5%
Once a month	31	5%
Once a week	69	12%
2-3 times per week	157	28%
Once daily	242	43%
No response	44	8%

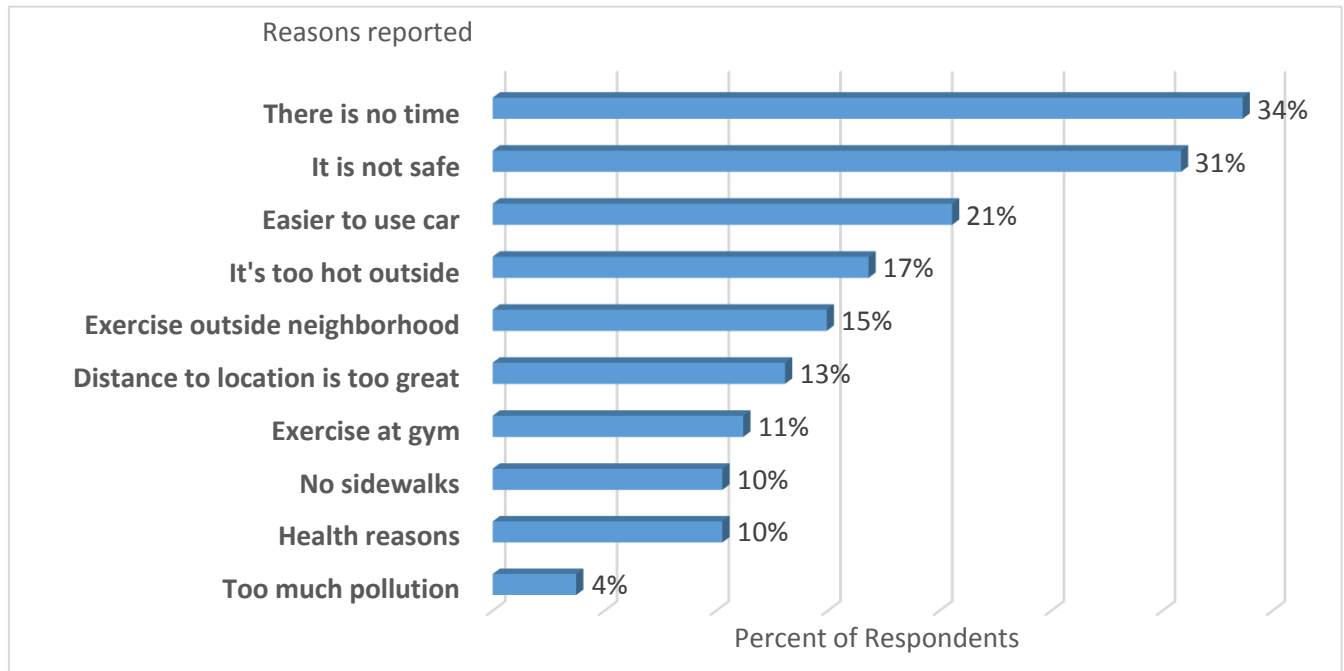
In 2014, VPH assessed issues related to the built environment to further investigate the barriers LA County residents face when walking in their neighborhoods. Out of 507 residents interviewed, the 3 most important reasons preventing owners from walking their dogs in the neighborhoods included: 1) the dog having access to a yard, 2) feeling unsafe and 3) too many stray dogs (**Fig.1**). It is important note that, although a dog may have frequent access to a backyard, it may not engage in physical activity in that area on its own.

Data from community surveys can help identify trends in both pet and human obesity. It is important to note that surveying a certain number of LA County residents and veterinarians may not reflect the whole county community, and these results should be interpreted accordingly.





**Figure 1:** Reported reasons why LA County dog owners may not walk their dogs in their neighborhoods. Results from Built-Environment Survey conducted at health fairs and low-cost veterinary clinics by VPH, 2014 (n=507, respondents may check more than 1 reason).



**Figure 2:** Reasons why LA County residents may not walk in their neighborhoods. Results from Built-Environment Survey conducted at health fairs and low-cost veterinary clinics by VPH, 2014 (n=507, respondents may check more than 1 reason).

## Recommendations to Reduce Obesity in People and Pets

One key component of a pet obesity prevention campaign in LA County should focus on pet owner education. Three key targeted education goals include 1) teaching owners to recognize a normal healthy weight in their pets, 2) training owners to measure the daily amount of food given to the pet and 3) encouraging pet owners to incorporate structured physical activity as part of their pets' daily routine.

Veterinary practitioners can be valuable resources for owners of overweight pets. During VPH's survey to veterinarians, 98% said that they offer nutritional guidelines to pet owners. Half of them mentioned doing so for every pet they see, however 17% only discussed nutrition if the pets are suffering from ailments related to obesity. In addition, most veterinary practitioners (93%) responded that they carry special diets that promote weight loss in dogs and cats, and the same percentage reported to have successfully helped a pet lose weight. If a pet is overweight, it is important that owners work closely with their veterinarian to discuss their animal's nutritional needs and determine if their pet is healthy enough to be physically active. Veterinarians can recommend the proper type and amount of food for a healthy weight-loss plan. It is also essential for them to communicate the harmful effects of obesity on a pet's health such as arthritis and diabetes.



Previous studies have shown that dogs can make people feel more motivated to exercise.<sup>10</sup> Data from local surveys suggest that the same holds true in LA County. Responses from the

Built-Environment survey done by VPH in 2014 (n=507) showed that over half (54%) of pet owners felt their dog motivated them to walk. This extra drive can make a significant impact in keeping people and dogs healthy. For example, walking a dog for ten minutes three times daily can help reach the physical activity recommendations of 150 minutes a week set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).<sup>11</sup>

The data gathered by VPH exposed safety concerns as another major barrier to walking, with 31% of survey respondents reporting feeling not safe enough to walk in their neighborhood (**Fig. 2**). Because there is strength in numbers, creating community-led walking groups can encourage people to be physically active together in a safe manner. Bringing this one step further, dog-friendly community walking groups<sup>12</sup> could be one solution to address both owner and pet obesity as well as safety issues in LA County.



## Conclusions

Based on data collected from local surveys, several factors contributing to obesity in people and pets were identified in LA County. Firstly, pet owners may not always be well-informed on issues related to pet obesity, including recognizing overweight animals, proper feeding practices and the need for dogs to engage in physical activity in spite of access to a backyard. Secondly, barriers exist which may prevent

some LA County residents from walking in their neighborhood, such as safety concerns.

Recommendations to keep people and their pets fit fall in three main strategies (**Table 2**):

1. Strengthening the role of veterinarians in addressing issues related to pet obesity.
2. Promoting the human-animal bond through joint physical activities with pets.
3. Creating a safe and friendly environment to promote walking practices.

Addressing pet and human obesity necessitates a true One Health approach, bringing together professionals from a variety of fields to work together towards a common goal. Using the information in this report, HPHF hopes to

promote a healthier LA County for both humans and animals alike.



## **Table 2: Steps you can take to address pet obesity**

### **1. WORK WITH YOUR VETERINARIAN:**

- a. Learn about the health effects of obesity in pets
- b. Identify normal weight for your pet
- c. Measure how much food your pet should eat per day
- d. Assess if it your pet healthy enough to be physically active

### **2. PROMOTE JOINT PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES WITH YOUR PET:**

- a. Walk, play or hike with your dog
- b. Play with a laser pointer or other toy to stimulate physical activity for your cat

### **3. CREATE A SAFE AND FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT:**

- a. Lead or join a walking group in your neighborhood

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