Here's to a New Year…and a Healthy Pet!

Need a New Year resolution? How about making sure your pet is healthy by maintaining its ideal weight? It is just as important for your pet to be at an ideal weight as it is for you! Below are some questions you should consider when thinking about your pet's health.

Is my pet overweight?

Dr. Ken Lambrecht, Westside Family Pet Clinic, Madison, recommends using the 1 to 9 Purina Body Condition Score (BCS) approach to determine if your pet is overweight. This is accomplished by feeling the pet's ribs and trunk and lumbosacral area (around the hips). By feeling their ribs just behind the foreleg, you should be able to verify if your pet is overweight. It should feel the same as your fingers below your knuckles when you make a fist. If you can not feel the ribs easily in this area, your pet may be overweight.

Why should my pet have regular check ups with a veterinarian?

It is important to have regular check ups with your pet to make sure it is healthy and at an ideal weight. Pets that are healthy and maintain their ideal weight just feel better. Similarly, when you're at a healthy weight, you feel better. Ideal weight pets live an average of 15 percent longer according to Dr. Lambrecht. In his opinion, "achieving and maintaining ideal weight is the best health insurance a pet owner can 'buy'."

Your veterinarian can also help you decipher how many calories your pet needs by doing a physical exam and age specific wellness testing. If your pet is more than 20 percent over ideal weight (which is considered obese), Dr. Lambrecht recommends a prescription weight loss diet and exercise. It is also important to schedule a follow up visit to make sure you and your pet are on the right track.

How often should I weigh my pet?

Your pet should be weighed monthly or even sooner if a food or diet change is made. Dr. Lambrecht says that you need to know the weight of your pet and their body condition score to determine how many calories your pet needs. Dr. Lambrecht uses medical record software that graphs a pet's weight and trends (positive and negative) that are easy to discuss with pet owners.

You can also weigh your pet right on your scale that you use at home! Just make sure that the same scale is used consistently.

Are there any health risks for an overweight pet?

There are many health risks that come with an unhealthy weight. Dr. Lambrecht points out that there are several common diseases that can develop from being overweight. Cats can develop diabetes, arthritis and urinary infections, and dogs may suffer from arthritis, diabetes, respiratory difficulty and increased risk of anesthesia.

How to master that ideal weight…

Dr. Lambrecht has had a lot of success using prescription pet foods that have high protein content (1 gram of protein per pound of ideal weight daily). He uses prescription products that create desirable results and satisfy the pet. This is just another important reason to make sure your pet has regular visits with their veterinarian.

In order to master your New Year resolution, know how many calories is in your pet's food. And don't forget to count the treat calories as well! Dr. Lambrecht stresses "follow up and coaching is key." Just as you may need help by your doctor or nutritionist, your pet needs advice from their veterinarian!

Keeping Wisconsin's Cows Happy!

Drive down any country road in Wisconsin and you'll see a variety of styles of barns that house dairy cattle. Dairy farms with less than 50 cows primarily use stanchions or tiestalls in small barns, which keep cows in individual stalls. Cows are typically let outside to a lot or pasture when weather conditions permit for exercise and so the barn can be cleaned. Although this was a common method of housing dairy cows in the past, today an estimated 77% of all Wisconsin dairy cows are housed in a freestall barn (USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service 2010 Dairy Producer Survey).

Freestall barns allow cows to move freely around the barn as they choose between lying in a stall, feeding at a bunk and drinking at a waterer. In both types of barn, farmers bring fresh feed to the cows, but the big difference is in how cows are managed, particularly in how they are milked. In a tiestall or stanchion barn, farmers must bring a milking machine to each cow, while cows housed in a freestall barn are walked to a parlor to be milked with a group of cows more efficiently.

Cows kept on pasture still need housing during winter and other times when wet or muddy conditions necessitate a need to provide the cows a dry, comfortable place to rest and feed. Many grazers (dairy farmers that feed their cows primarily on pasture) use freestall barns to house their cows during these times, since many also use a parlor to milk their cows throughout the year.

Veterinary care is essential in every type of dairy cattle housing system. While tiestall and stanchion barns keep individual cows in one place in the barn, freestall barns and pasture systems have special areas where groups and individual cows can be safely restrained for examination and treatment if necessary. Veterinarians help farmers learn to detect sick cows just a little differently in each housing system. Though some farmers might be able to remember the milk production and medical history of a particular cow in a certain tiestall on a very small farm, the freedom cows are given in freestall barns requires farmers to watch for more specific behavioral signs of illness and use a computer-based record keeping system to track the performance and progress of individual cows.

A new program at the UW-Madison School of Veterinary Medicine aims to help farmers build

dairy cattle housing that optimizes performance, health and well-being. ‘The Dairyland Initiative’, developed by veterinarians Drs. Nigel Cook and Ken Nordlund, combines dairy cattle health, production and behavior research with years of field experience in housing design into a web-based information center and a building plan risk assessment program. Wisconsin dairy farmers have free access to the website at http://TheDairylandInitiative.vetmed.wisc.edu .

The ‘Wisconsin Blueprint’ found on the website consists of two decision trees – sets of questions that need to be answered when designing barns for adult cows, calves or heifers. Photographs, diagrams, charts, videos, and spreadsheet decision tools all aid in presenting the concepts and characteristics of good barn design. Virtual tours of barns designed with these concepts in mind – including small and large freestall barns, a cross-ventilated barn, tiestall barns, and remodeled barns – provide an inside-look at different designs with layouts, photographs, stall dimensions, performance monitors, video of the barn and an interview with the farmer.

Agricultural builders, lenders and supply companies that support the ideas of The Dairyland Initiative are listed in directories on the website to connect farmers with teams that want to use welfare-friendly building practices. For a nominal fee, Wisconsin dairy farmers can send their new or remodel building plans to the Initiative veterinarians to look for areas of risk to cow or calf health and performance that should be considered for change and improvement.

Visitors to TheDairylandInitiative.vetmed.wisc.edu may preview the website by clicking through the tabs at the top of the page or by downloading the 2-page preview linked on the home page. To learn more about