Josephine Anne Oakden, FdSc RVN ISFM CertFN CertCFVHNut

Josephine Anne graduated from the Royal Veterinary College in 2008 and worked in a variety of small animal and mixed practices in Norfolk, Essex, London, Wales and the Midlands. She currently works as a practice manager and head nurse at a small animal practice in Leicester, where she also runs Nutrition Clinics. Jo has undertaken further certificates in Canine and Feline Clinical Nutrition, Feline Nursing and End of Life Care with Compassion Understood. Email: jo.oakden@aol.com pauloakden@aol.com

Banning the bowl: thinking outside the bowl when it comes to feeding our pets

Josephine Anne Oakden FdSc RVN ISFMCertFN CertCFVHNut
Leicestershire, UK

ABSTRACT: With increasing number of pets becoming overweight we need to look at innovative ways to feed our dogs and cats. There are ways to make feeding time more interactive for feline hunters and canine scavengers. Owner compliance is essential in reducing weight and boredom in their pets and there are ways that nurses can involve them to be creative in their feeding rituals.

Keywords: nutrition; obesity; alternative feeding

Introduction

I will start with a bold statement: I believe the majority of canines and felines that I see in practice are bored. I should probably provide some context for this statement – I work in a city centre, my patients are primarily cats that live in apartments, and have little access to the outdoors. The dogs are typically in apartments or occasionally in a house with access to a small garden. They rarely get quality exercise or stimulation. Running nutrition clinics in practice, I have come to realise that we are neglecting an important part of our beloved pets' welfare; purely due to our need for convenience. This has led me to look at alternative ways of feeding our pets; with the intention of increasing the stimulation our pets get from their food and improving the relationship with their owner.

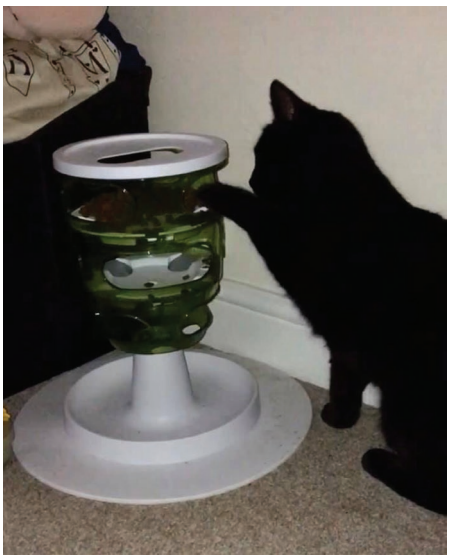

Figure 1. Interactive cat feeder.

Ban the bowl!

We as humans in the UK are conditioned to eat with cutlery and from a plate, at set meal times. So it makes sense that to conveniently fit in with our lifestyle, we feed pets in a bowl, at set times of the day, with a particular amount. I have found two forms of stress that this gives owners: the first – 'my pet doesn't eat all of its food at a meal, I don't think they're eating enough'. This statement is usually followed by a description of all the 'extras' the pet gets and the pet is then usually overweight. The second is that their pet eats all of their food extremely fast, and then resort to begging behaviour. Often offering an appointment to be able to see the pet, and carry out a 9-point body condition score (BCS) (dogs and cats, rabbits should use the WSAVA 5-point score) as well as a muscle condition score (MCS) (WSAVA), allows the owners to be able to really look at their pets and accept that they are not suffering from a lack of food! Occasionally some of the patients we see will be on the leaner side, but from personal experience these tend to be younger or unneutered and they are usually pretty active with a decent MCS, I have never been concerned about a healthy animal being 'fussy'.

DOI: 10.1080/17415349.2020.1731269

Felines are hunters; they descend from a territorial, solitary ancestor (Bradshaw, 2019). Play for adult cats is rarely a 'social transaction' – instead they are typically motivated by their predatory behaviour (Bradshaw, 2019). So if this is the case, why do we give our felines under our care such an easy time when it comes to feeding habits. Cats are typically better at self-regulating their food than dogs. In the wild a feline would catch 12-20 small prey over a 24 hour period (Beitz, Bauer, & Behnke, Nutrition Committee, 2006). In a domestic environment we tend to stick to two or three feeds a day, where some cats graze and others eat the bowlful (Figure 1). Our beloved pets still do exhibit ancestral hunting behaviours – for example, the dogs that hide and bury food items that they do not need.

Dogs are scavengers – they are domesticated now but may still demonstrate that scavenging behaviour (Bradshaw, 2006). Our pet dogs who do not eat their entire meal typically do not live with another dog; they have no competition for their food. The food is not a valuable resource. It is not used for training, something far more valuable is used for training – for example sausage or cheese – this is novel and rare and directly fed by the owner, so it is more valuable. Our pet dogs do not have to use their brains or noses to find and work for their food. It is just there, regularly. For a dog that is not food motivated, it would rather be with you, or on a walk or playing than be eating their bowl of biscuits. To engage them with their food again we need to increase the value of this resource and stop the extras, as well as combining it with stimulating interaction (Figure 2).

So how can we address this in practice? Nutrition is my passion. I am fortunate to work within an environment that allows me to share this passion with our clients, and I have set up nutrition clinics that run from puppy and kitten to our more mature pets. This has allowed me to develop a plan for both dogs and cats, which drives owners away from use of the bowl. You firstly need to ascertain how the cat or dog is fed currently, who is responsible for feeding and what type of food that pet is on. The best way to get owner compliance is to address change slowly and keep it as close to their typical feeding routines as possible. You will find they become quite creative after just a little bit of guidance. Asking owners to complete a simple questionnaire and a food diary can help give you a clear picture of how they are fed and when in their daily life. Figure 3 is an example of the food questionnaire I use in practice.

Alternative feeding: what can we suggest?

Cats

We should design their alternative feeding around their natural behaviours. This will increase their activity levels within the home environment, hopefully also aiding with weight loss. In a multi-cat house-hold a microchip feeder helps control portions, especially those cats that do not seem able to self-regulate. I typically advise that owners weigh out their cats daily requirement of food (if dry). This then gets split in a few ways. Firstly, one third of their daily portion can go into the feeder or bowl. One third can be given at a different time of day using a food ball. It takes time for cats to figure these out but owners should persist, they work really well. The final third, I encourage owners to interact directly with their pet. Laser pens should not be used on their own, without a 'catch', as this can lead to frustration. But they make for a perfect accompaniment to biscuits, if after every third or fourth 'failed' catch, a biscuit is thrown as a successful catch. Some cats even just enjoy chasing their biscuits and it does wonders for the human cat bond, improving the owners' relationship with their cat.

Spread out their resources – cats do not associate drinking and eating as something done together (Bradshaw, 2019). If there are stairs in the house why not put the food bowl upstairs, at least the stairs then have to be climbed in order to get food! There are so many puzzle feeders available now, for wet and dry food – they do not have to be expensive but look around and get creative (Figure 4). There is a wealth of information online. I have included a list of useful resources.

Figure 2. Encouraging interaction with food.

Food Diary & Questionnaire

Please complete fully and honestly as this will help with creating the perfect plan for your pet.

1. What pet food is your pet currently being fed? (Brand and flavour)
2. How is the amount they are fed measured?
3. What treats does your pet get, and how often?
4. How many times per day do you feed your pet the allocated pet food? And where in the house are they fed?
5. How many people in the household are responsible for feeding the pet?
6. Do you have any other pets in the household?
7. What kind of physical exercise does your pet get in an average day?
8. Do you think your pet is overweight?
9. Does your pet have any illnesses or are they on any medication not prescribed by us?
10. Please complete a 7-day food diary. Everything that passes your pets lips in a day must be recorded. This will help us identify where the extra weight may be coming from as well as aiding us to create a plan that fits with your lifestyle at home.
11. Look at the Body Condition Score attached. How do you score your pet?

Figure 3. Owner questionnaire.

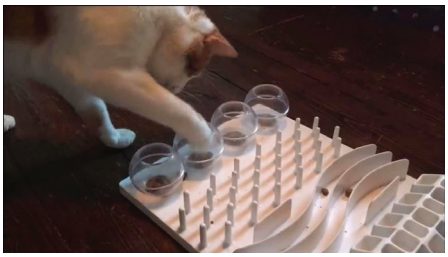

Figure 4. Cat puzzle feeder.

Dogs

I always think of dogs as having a triangle of happiness. The three points on this triangle are: the owner, physical activity and food. Having these three points fulfilled leaves the inside of the triangle full – mental stimulation!

In our busy lives, are these three areas being fulfilled? The answer is mostly no, so, what can we do?

Dogs were designed to be able to eat a large meal quickly, they have huge expansion capabilities of their stomachs (Bradshaw, 2006). We are never going to fulfil this with our pets without overfeeding, as we feed them daily with high quality (mostly!) food. We need to get creative (Figure 4). For those 'fussy' dogs, who's owners worry because they do not eat their entire bowl of food in one go, we need to increase the value of the resource of the food and combine it with one of the other points on my happiness triangle. Try scatter feeding, snuffle matts or hide and seek with the biscuits. Engage their brain and make it an activity that involves the owner and the dog (but not sat handfeeding chicken.).

For those dogs where the food does not even touch the side, then we need to be increasing the amount of effort they need to put in to get their food. Stuff a Kong full of a dampened portion of food and then freeze it. Make your own puzzle feeder or scatter the biscuits in the garden on the grass. I usually recommend splitting the food into 3 meals throughout the day with at least 2 of those meals away from the bowl.

Conclusion

If we start to add in the way we feed our pets to the diet plan, weight loss will occur. You will be amazed at how creative owners can be once you encourage them to break that barrier and change the habits of generations before them. They will be happier and their pets will certainly be happier. It is up to us as nurses to lead this change and educate our owners. There is a plethora of information available, but without the basic knowledge to make informed decisions around feeding practices, it can be very easy for our clients to become confused and easily misled. We need to build up the trust and keep ourselves informed to be able to be that support and guide for our owners from the first time they come to see us with their beloved new pet. Ban the Bowl and get creative!

Useful resources

'The Cat Nurse' available online: https://thecatnurse.co.uk/

ISFM Advice sheets available online: https://icatcare.org/veterinary/isfm/

Petfood manufacturers association available online: https://www.pfma.org.uk/feeding-cats-and-dogs-for-behavioural-enrichment

Cats protection available online: https://www.cats.org.uk/belfast/feature-pages/enrichment-for-catscats

WSAVA Body Condition Score and Muscle Condition Score Charts. Dog body condition scores avaiable online: https://www.wsava.org/wsava/media/arpita-and-emma-editorial/body-condition-score-dog.pdf

Cat body condition scores available online: https://www.wsava.org/WSAVA/media/PDF_old/Body-condition-score-chart-cats.pdf

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Beitz, D., Bauer, J., & Behnke, K, Nutrition Committee. (2006). *Nutrient requirements of dogs and cats*. National Academy of Sciences.

Bradshaw, J. (2019). Why do problem feline behaviours develop. *Feline Focus*, *5*(3), 5.

Bradshaw, J. (2006). The evolutionary basis for the feeding behavior of domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*) and cats (*Felis catus*). *The Journal of Nutrition*, *136*(7), 1927S–1931S. doi:10.1093/jn/136.7.1927S