

Brachycephalic Working Group (BWG) Policy Position:

Obesity in Brachycephalic Dogs

July 17th, 2019

Executive summary

The Brachycephalic Working Group (BWG) recognises obesity as an important condition with significant direct and indirect health and welfare consequences for brachycephalic dogs. BWG believes that improved prevention and management of obesity in brachycephalic dogs by owners, veterinary professionals, breeders and others with some responsibility for these dogs will substantially improve the overall quality of lives of these dogs.

BWG provides evidence here on the nature and scale of the obesity problem in brachycephalic dogs and concludes with some calls to action for various groups with some recommendations to improve prevention and management of obesity in brachycephalic dogs.

Obesity as an important condition

Obesity in dogs is now increasingly recognised as a condition with serious welfare implications for dogs in general, and especially for brachycephalic dogs (1). Obesity has been associated with increased risk of several diseases including joint disease, dental disease, hyperadrenocorticism, hypothyroidism and lower urinary tract disease (2). As a result, health and quality of life can be severely harmed (3-5) and lifespan may be foreshortened (6, 7). Obese dogs also show decreased heat tolerance and stamina (8) and increased anaesthetic risk (9).

Obesity presents special challenges for brachycephalic dogs. Brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome (BOAS) is a critical welfare issue that is variably associated with dyspnoea, exercise intolerance, heat sensitivity, sleep disorders or collapse (10). Obese brachycephalic dogs have a higher risk of BOAS and an increasing level of excess bodyweight is associated with worsening breathing problems in brachycephalic dogs (11, 12).

Obesity can be measured using the one-to-nine (1-9) body condition score (BCS) scale based on visual assessment and palpation recommended by the WSAVA Global Nutrition Panel (13, 14). Dogs with a BCS of 8 or 9 are obese (at least 30% excess weight). Bodyweight itself does not directly determine obesity but repeated bodyweight measurements in the same animal can identify early increases and trends that can trigger prompt intervention.

Despite these well-recognised welfare impacts on affected dogs, obesity and overweight status are prevalent in the UK dog population (15, 16), particularly in some brachycephalic breeds. In a UK sample of 154 brachycephalic dogs, 57% were overweight or obese (12). A UK study of 1009 Pugs under first opinion veterinary care reported overweight/obesity as

the most common disorder, with 13.2% of Pugs affected (17). However, even this prevalence is likely to under-estimate the problem because obesity is not consistently assessed or recorded during veterinary consultations (18). A study that included 40 Pugs reported that UK show Pugs had 10 times the odds of obesity compared to non-Pug dogs (19).

Conclusions

Obesity is common in brachycephalic dogs and can significantly affect health and quality of life. As a result, BWG has identified preventing and managing obesity as a key priority in improving the welfare of brachycephalic breeds. BWG supports the position statements from BSAVA (20), BVA (21) and WSAVA (22) that emphasise the need for veterinary professionals to focus on prevention and management of obesity and to hold supportive, non-judgemental conversations with owners of pets with obesity.

Calls to action

BWG calls on various stakeholders to work in partnership to improve the health and welfare of brachycephalic dogs by sensibly addressing obesity.

The specific recommendations of the BWG are:

- Breed clubs, veterinary professionals and animal charities should communicate with the general public, dog owners and breeders that obesity is a serious condition and has particularly adverse impacts for brachycephalic dogs.
- The Kennel Club, breed clubs and veterinary professionals should prevent the normalisation and acceptability of obesity in brachycephalic dogs and instead educate owners on the characteristics of healthy body shape as well as the benefits that healthy body condition can bring to quality of life.
- Veterinary professionals should assess and record bodyweight and condition score when examining brachycephalic dogs and explain to owners the health and welfare implications of obesity.
- Breeders, show judges veterinary professionals and animal charities should promote regular monitoring of body condition scores and bodyweight in brachycephalic dogs, and to help owners to recognise and act on deviations from the ideal body condition score.
- Veterinary professionals should actively endeavour to help owners to implement weight management programmes for obese dogs and to proactively prevent obesity (e.g. by utilising regular quality of life assessments, such as PDSA PetWise MOTs (23) and puppy growth curves).

- Owners of brachycephalic dogs should ask a veterinary professional to measure the bodyweight and body condition of their dog at every visit, and seek advice on maintaining a healthy bodyweight.
- Breeders should emphasise the importance of a healthy diet, physical activity and regular bodyweight monitoring to owners purchasing their puppies.
- Breeders should use the Puppy Contract www.puppycontract.org.uk during all sales of puppies as a tool to provide details about the puppy's' bodyweight and to advise on an appropriate diet (type and amount) to help new owners maintain their puppy at a healthy body condition score. This information should emphasise the importance of good bodyweight management during the dog's lifetime.
- The Kennel Club should continue to review 'Breed Standards' for brachycephalic breeds, taking account of relevant external advice, to ensure wording and images do not promote selection of dogs with phenotypic characteristics associated with obesity.
- Show judges should ensure that they only reward dogs with healthy bodyweight and body condition at shows.

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