

Weighty Issues

by Stacia Matthews

Her long tongue and snaggletooth are unmistakable. These distinct features make Annie unique. But this four-year-old boxer resembles many other pooches in one important way: She's a porker. According to a new report from the National Academy of Sciences, Annie is part of an epidemic that's growing—literally—in more than 69 million American homes: One in four pets is fat.

Ironically, Annie belongs to a health-conscious family. Karen and Alan Busse eat right and exercise. Annie tags along on one-mile walks every day. "If you say 'go for a walk,' she'll run to the door," says Karen. But the dog still tips the scales at 10 to 15 pounds over her ideal weight. "We bought 'diet' dog food. She just ate twice as much," Karen says. "It didn't help." Another mealtime problem: Annie isn't on a feeding schedule. "We aren't very good about that," Karen admits.

When Annie's not nibbling from her bowl, she's chomping on the savory stuff—doggie treats and table scraps. "We give her a biscuit and very limited scraps. We don't feed her from the table, although she likes apples and broccoli," Karen says. Adds Alan, "And she loves eggs. It's good for her coat—makes it shiny."

A physical disability doesn't help Annie, either. In the past, she had surgery on both hind legs to repair ACL tears. Over the years, arthritis set in, limiting her mobility. Too much running results in limping; Rimadyl helps ease the pain.

Annie is not alone in her dilemma; 360 million dogs and cats are overweight. Like humans who carry too many pounds, chubby Fido or Felix runs a higher risk of developing diabetes, heart disease and joint and hip difficulties.

Dogs and cats pack on the pounds for the same reasons two-legged mammals are getting bigger. Paul Mann, founder of FETCH! Pet Care, blames the foods consumed by companion animals. Pet cuisine contains more additives than it used to—fillers such as grains, corn and wheat by-products. These "bad carbs" convert to fat when pets eat too much and move too little. "Like us, pets need a balance of protein, fat, vitamins and minerals," Mann says.

Overfeeding is a problem, too. The pet-food industry serves up a booming business. Walk into any pet store, and you'll see aisles overstuffed with a variety of meals, snacks and treats. In 2004, American pet owners spent a whopping \$14.2 billion on pet food alone. Last year, that figure climbed to \$14.5 billion. "The industry knows we pamper our pets, but pet owners need to be



savvier," Mann says. "There's nothing wrong with pampering. But if you're going to give your pet treats throughout the day, reduce the amount of food in their main meals. It's important to maintain calorie control."

What about diet pet foods? Mann laughs at the notion. Many dogs, like Annie, simply eat twice as much. And pet owners who buy the cheap stuff might want to reconsider: These meals are the pet equivalent of

fast food, Mann adds.

Before determining your pet's diet, talk with a veterinarian or a trusted pet-store resource to discuss how the food under consideration is prepared. A low-calorie diet should be high in fiber to help your dog or cat feel full without the consumption of extra calories. Feline owners might serve up more wet (canned) food, Mann adds. Cats eat 12 to 20 times each day, and they

don't drink as much water as dogs. Add in all the cat naps, and weight gain is especially easy.

At vacation time, pets often are boarded in kennels, a move Mann says only intensifies the problem. Instead, when you vacation, find a respected sitter, he suggests. The home environment keeps pets happier, as they maintain their regular mealtimes and play routines. It may be a little more expensive up front, but you can save in the long run by avoiding diseases down the road. "If you keep them happy, they're healthier," Mann says.

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Movement is also key. Most pet owners don't exercise and therefore don't exercise their beloved animals. Owners work longer hours these days, and as a result, they're not home to play with their pets. "With the trend of pet humanization on the rise in terms of how pets are treated, equipped and pampered—often in much the same way as humans—it's surprising that many pet owners don't consider exercise as a fundamental way to assure their dog or cat's happiness and overall well-being," Mann says. "Let's face it: We regard our pets as bona fide family members."

The benefits of regular exercise are many and impressive. Consider the following:

Energy: Daily walks or play sessions provide a great way to energize lethargic and/or overweight pets, giving them a much-needed spring in their step. Walk dogs twice a day, or plan play sessions in the backyard or a dog-friendly park. And don't neglect indoor cats. "Just a few minutes a day, get your kitty to chase a string," Mann advises. "This will be good for the cat and you."

Socialization: New pups, recently adopted pets, those received as gifts and timid animals especially benefit from daily playful interaction with both humans and other pets.

Temperament: High-strung, hyperactive or even aggressive dogs often calm down and relax after a good day's workout. Regular exercise keeps angst-ridden pets in a greater state of contentment.

Happiness: Pets that exercise daily often thrive on and return the love and attention they receive from humans and their furry friends during the process.

Health: As with humans, daily exercise provides the pet body with a variety of health benefits, including improved metabolism and digestion, enhancement of the immune system, increased bone and muscle density, overall strength and maximized cardiovascular-system function.

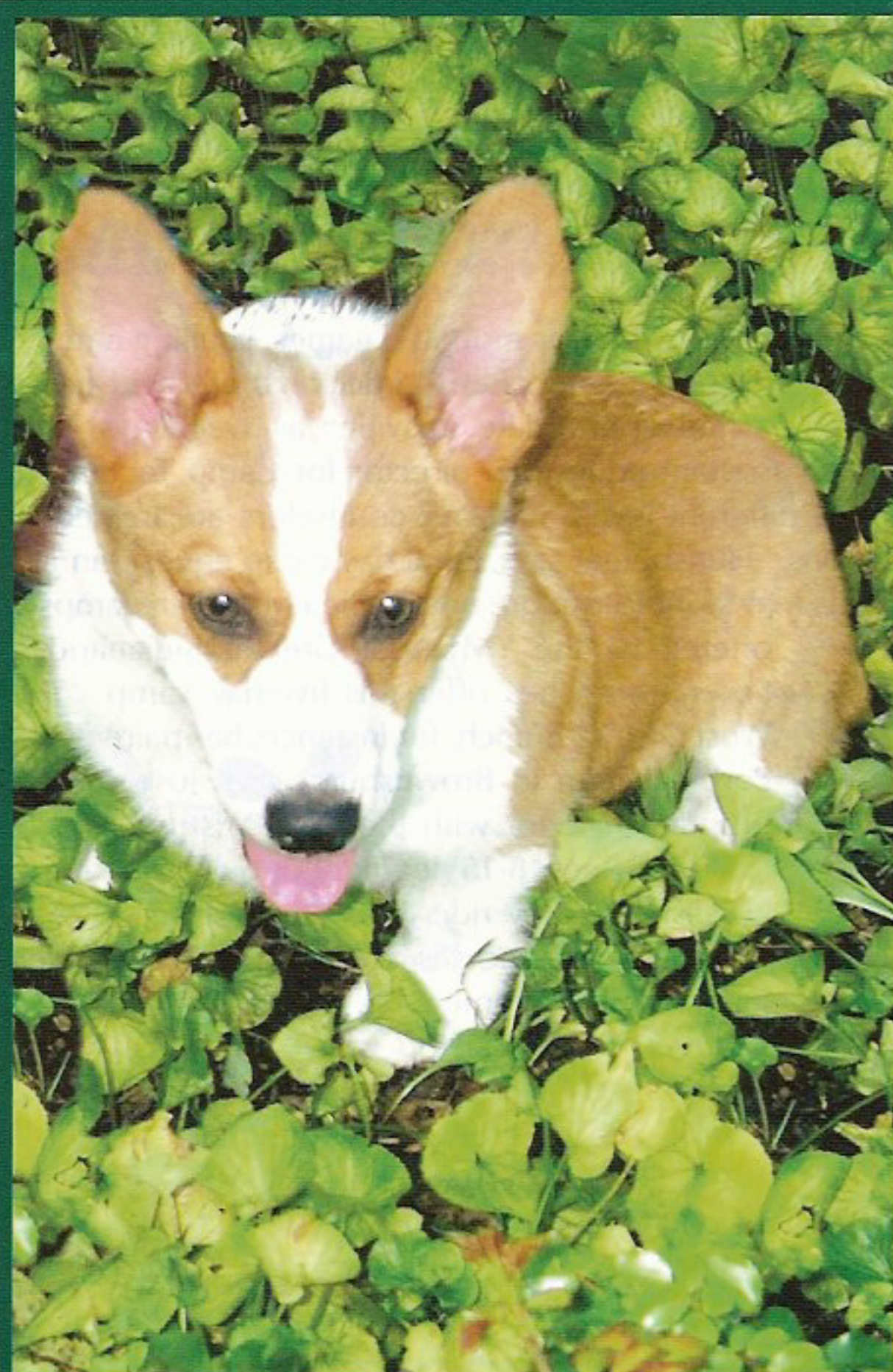
Longevity: We all want our pets to be around as long as possible. The multitude of health benefits incurred through daily exercise can help your dog or cat live a longer, healthier life.

Back at the Busse home, boxer Annie is slimming down and toning up, despite her physical challenges. Karen and Alan have gradually introduced changes to improve Annie's eating habits and physical activity—adjustments that they hope will lead to a healthier long-term lifestyle for their dog.

Annie is now on a feeding schedule. "We don't keep her bowl full now," Karen says. "We're better with a schedule. We used to feel we had to keep it full, but we don't do that now." Treats are

given once or twice a week, not every day.

And in addition to those daily one-mile walks, Annie now "works out" with a new companion: newly adopted boxer Zoey, a young bundle of energy. "Zoey gives her someone to play with," Karen explains, "and now she'll play more. She'll run out back. It just keeps her more active." ■



Central Indiana Kennel Club, Inc.

Indianapolis, Indiana

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The CIKC holds monthly meetings on the second Thursday of each month at 7 p.m. Please call for the location, and visit us if you are interested in what we do. You need not be a breeder, show a dog, or even be a dog owner to become a member of CIKC. We welcome anyone interested in taking part in our ambitions and functions, and who agrees to abide by our By-Laws and Constitution. Our annual membership fee is \$8 for an individual and \$12 for a couple.

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