



My Dog Is Skinnier Than Yours

By [LENORE SKENAZY](#) | April 22, 2008

As blimps the country, so blimp its dogs — about 30% are now considered overweight. But the dogs have something we don't have: A magic bullet.



[Pfizer](#) may not have cured cancer yet, or that little problem called AIDS, but it *has* come up with [Slentrol](#), the first FDA-approved diet drug for dogs. The company just began advertising it this past week, according to the magazine [Advertising Age](#), thus begging (if you will) the question:

Woof?

Translation: Dogs need diet pills? Why? Are they sitting around like bored housewives, watching TV, popping bonbons, and fantasizing about the mailman?

Pretty much, yes. The problem is that a lot of pet owners are so busy, they've stopped taking their dogs out as much. So the dogs stay home, turning into pooch potatoes.

This makes owners feel guilty, so they pop the dog a treat. Then another. Then another. Pretty soon perky Princess is a fat frump who hasn't left the house in 15 years. She could star in a [John Waters](#) movie.

At that point the owner feels so bad, he just may do what the Slentrol ads recommend: Ask his vet about the pound-melting pill — actually a liquid you can squirt directly into the dog's mouth or add to his sole remaining source of comfort: supper. And no, it doesn't work on humans.

The studies at Pfizer show that the drug helps dogs lose about 3% of their weight in one month, which is great if, as the ad gently suggests, "diet and exercise" haven't helped. But who are we kidding here? How can diet and exercise *not help*?

"Dogs are not snacking," the director of medicine at the [ASPCA](#) in New York, [Louise Murray](#), said. "Dogs are not going to the refrigerator and pulling out the Haagen Dazs. They are being given the snacks."

We are as blind to our Alpo-enabling as we are to our own bad habits. "I say to these people who've been trying to get their dog or cat to lose weight for about a year: 'Mrs. Smith, if Fifi were on a deserted island with no food, do you think she would lose weight?' And they say, 'No.' They think the fat has nothing to do with how much the pet is eating," a vet and judge on [Animal Planet](#)'s "Groomer Has It," [Karen Halligan](#), said.

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To be fair, part of the problem is also that pet food has become so nutritious and delicious that now even a little goes a long way, pound wise. Meantime, the snacks themselves have become almost too cute (for humans) to resist. They're shaped like hotdogs, pizza, people, "And of course the dog couldn't care less if it was just a brown blob," Dr. Murray said.

Fun snacks + fattening food + no exercise = flab. This sounds so depressingly familiar that a depressingly familiar answer is starting to pop up for the dogs, too: Personal trainers.

"What I tell every single owner is that the key to rehab and longevity is the right kind of exercise," the founder of a wellness and weight loss clinic for dogs, [Dr. Jessica Waldman](#), said. "The wrong kind of exercise is uncontrolled play."

Fetching and frolicking — that kind of uncontrolled play? Isn't that exactly what most dogs need *more* of? "Oh no. No, no," Ms. Waldman, a vet, said. She has her canine clients running obstacle courses and jogging on an underwater treadmill. And then there's pooch Pilates — formerly known as "begging."

"When you teach a dog to beg, meaning you ask them to sit up, that's core abdominals," Ms. Waldman said. To further strengthen and tone, "We teach them how to go into sort of a 'down dog,' where their head is down toward the ground but their rear legs are up high."

That's right. She's a human teaching a dog a human yoga position based on a dog position. It probably will not surprise you to learn that Dr. Waldman's practice — CARE — is in Southern California.

Still, as goes [California](#), so goes [America](#) when it comes to health, and probably even dog health. Already, Ms. Waldman said two of the area's top personal trainers have brought their overweight dogs to her.

Like most of the vets I spoke with, Ms. Waldman is not keen on giving dogs the new weight loss drug. She believes in workouts and nutrition instead. For instance, she had those personal trainers start cooking homemade food for their chubby dogs, using a recipe that called for 20 different ingredients. I don't even prepare that kind of meal for my own family.

We can be ridiculous when it comes to taking care of our pets — stuffing them with treats, hiring trainers, cooking gourmet meals, and forgetting the basics: [Frisbee!](#) Time in the park! More hugs, less drugs — and maybe a couple less treats, too.

Or, as they might sum it up in your house: Ruff. (Translation: Let's go outside! Now!)

Find more of Ms. Skenazy's work at her blog [Free Range Kids](#). Her column in [The New York Sun](#) "[Why I Let My 9-Year-Old Ride the Subway Alone](#)" was the subject of the [Newsweek](#) article [Helicopter Moms vs. Free-Range Kids](#) posted to the web on April 21. lskenazy@yahoo.com