



# THE HIDDEN EPIDEMIC

How Sub-Optimal Feeding  
Habits Are Fueling Chronic  
Disease in Pets

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13+ YEARS OF VETERINARY PRACTICE & INNOVATION IN PET NUTRITION

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

*Over my 13 years of veterinary practice I have observed a recurring pattern: pet parents do everything “right” but still wonder why their furry family member is diagnosed with obesity, diabetes, or chronic digestive disease.*

*Many of these diagnoses can be traced back to feeding routines and behaviors that are widely accepted yet deeply detrimental. In this white paper I present the science, share the clinical trends, and challenge the “it’s just how pets eat” mindset.*



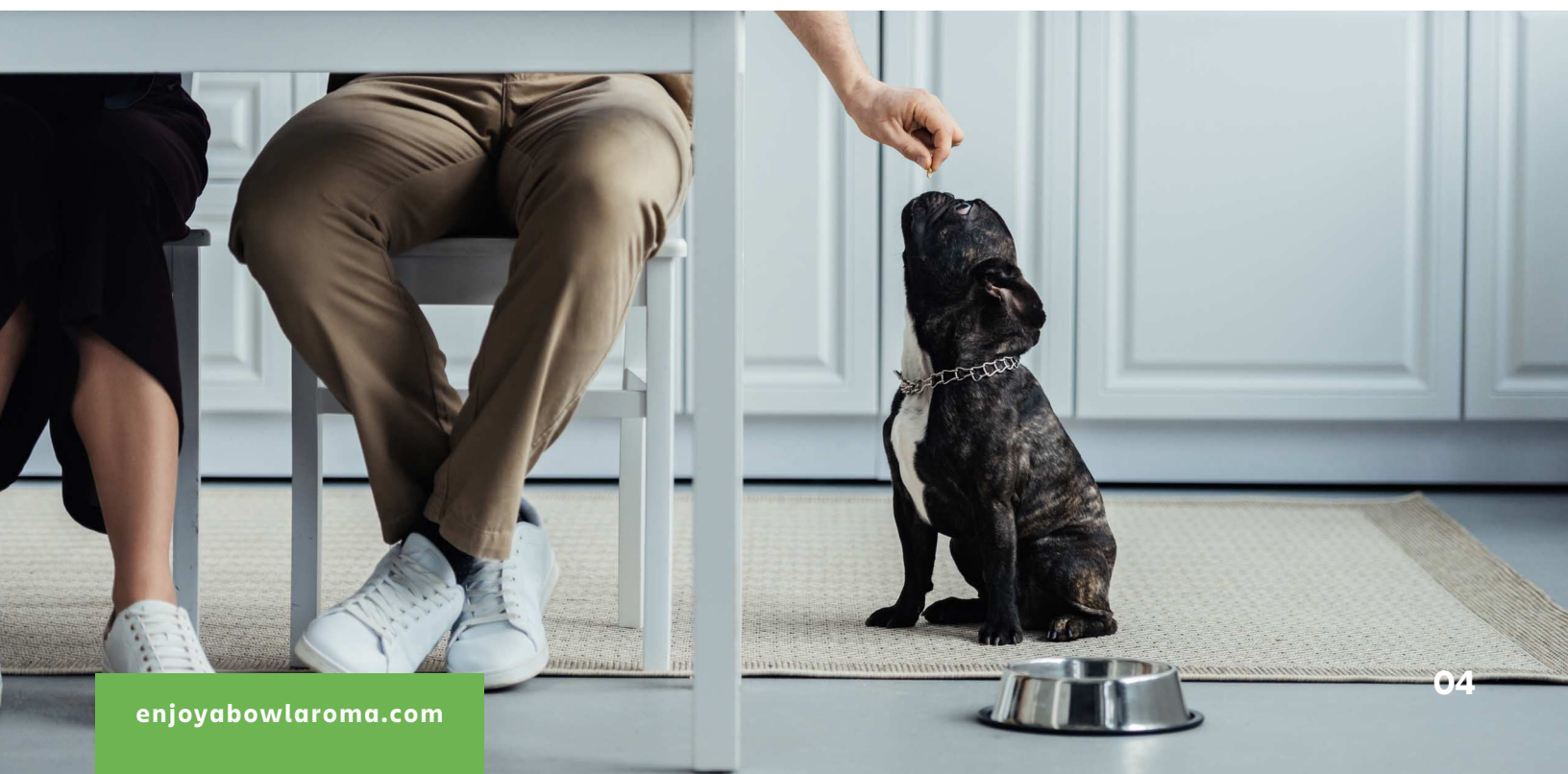
*Dr. Owens*

## E X E C U T I V E   S U M M A R Y

In companion animal medicine we face a quiet but profound shift: **pets are living longer but sicker**, and a large driver of that trend is not genetics—it's the feeding behaviors we accept as “normal.”

This white paper uncovers the evidence linking everyday feeding mistakes—free-feeding, excessive treats, inappropriate diet switching, lack of sensory enrichment—to a cascade of chronic diseases: obesity, pancreatitis, diabetes mellitus, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), and secondary systemic conditions.

By understanding the problem now, pet parents and veterinary professionals alike can begin the shift toward prevention rather than reaction.





# The problem:

## Feeding Habits We Normalize

### Free-Feeding & Grazing

Leaving food out 24/7 or allowing ad-libitum access removes the natural rhythm of mealtime. In both dogs and cats, energy intake becomes disconnected from metabolic demand—leading to weight gain and metabolic stress. A review on canine and feline obesity described this as a “One Health” issue—mirroring human obesity trends and underscoring how lifestyle feeds disease.<sup>1</sup>

### Excessive Treat-Based Reward

Treats and table scraps may feel like love, but they often exceed caloric needs, lack nutrient balance, and reinforce eating even when the body does not require fuel. This establishes a pattern of overnutrition and low-nutrient density meals.

### Meal Presentation & Appetite Engagement

Feeding is more than providing nutrients—it’s an appetite event. Poor bowl design, lack of odor/aroma stimulation, and bland presentation contribute to poor intake, especially in pets on therapeutic diets or with reduced appetite. An older study noted that soft diet consistency was linked to increased periodontal disease in dogs and cats, highlighting that sensory experience influences health outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

### Diet Switching Without Strategy

Switching foods too rapidly, or alternating “high flavor” and “bland” meals, destabilises the gut microbiome and digestive integrity. The aging pet review points out that diet formulation remains behind our advancing understanding of physiological ageing.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ResearchGate

<sup>2</sup> PubMed

<sup>3</sup> OUP Academic



# The science:

## How Feeding Habits Lead to Disease

### Obesity & Insulin Resistance

Obesity in dogs and cats is no longer niche—it is epidemic. The prevalence of overweight pets ranges from ~22-44% in some studies.

ResearchGate<sup>1</sup> Fat accumulation alters adipokine signaling, increases inflammatory mediators, and contributes to insulin resistance—setting the stage for diabetes mellitus, joint disease, and organ dysfunction.

### Pancreatitis

A diet high in fat, or one that triggers erratic eating patterns (treat binges, “cheat meals”), may activate pancreatic inflammation. The veterinary review of pancreatitis outlines how obesity and feeding behavior are risk-factors.<sup>2</sup>

### IBD / Chronic GI Disease

Disrupted feeding schedules, frequent diet changes, and lack of sensory engagement lead to “grazing” behavior which imposes constant load on the digestive tract. Over time this may contribute to gut-brain axis dysfunction, microbiome shifts, and chronic inflammatory bowel disease.

### Oral Health & Secondary Systemic Risk

Feeding texture and consistency matter. One study shows that soft diets increase periodontal disease in pets—and periodontal disease is increasingly recognised as not just a dental issue but a systemic health risk (kidney, heart, immune).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ResearchGate

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>3</sup> SAGE Journals+1

# Current solutions

## & Their Limitations

- **Calorie-controlled therapeutic diets:**

Effective in theory, but compliance drops when pets reject the diet or owners revert to “normal” feeding patterns.

- **Treat reduction programmes:**

Often advised, but treat behaviour is deeply embedded in pet-parent psychology and rarely fully eliminated.

- **Behavioral feeding enrichment:**

Puzzle feeders and timed feeding are beneficial, yet many owners revert to convenience feeding.

- **Dental home-care programmes:**

Tooth brushing and specialized diets help—but feeding behavior still impacts oral health.

All of the above are valid—yet none fully address the feeding event itself: the sensory, behavioral, and physiological components of appetite and compliance.

If we continue to **treat feeding as a mere logistics task** (food into bowl), rather than a physiologic and behavioral one (feeding event with rhythm, engagement, and nutrient-density), **we'll continue to see chronic disease escalate.**

## C A L L T O A W A R E N E S S

If we continue to treat feeding as a mere logistics task (food into bowl), rather than a physiologic and behavioral one (feeding event with rhythm, engagement, and nutrient-density), we'll continue to see chronic disease escalate.

**It's time for pet parents to shift from “just feed” to “feed right,” and for veterinary professionals to elevate feeding behaviour as a pillar of preventive care.**



## C O N C L U S I O N

Feeding habits are not benign—**they are powerful modifiers of pet health and longevity.**

As a veterinarian with extensive clinical experience, I urge pet owners and professionals alike to recognise feeding as the first frontier of chronic disease prevention.

Over the coming months you will be presented with deeper dives into each of the related diseases, the current state of the science, and emerging solutions. Stay with me.

**There's a better way.**



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