



Obesity

About 40% of pet cats in the U.S. are overweight. Obesity in cats is rising at an alarming rate – much like obesity in American people. And just like in humans, obesity is a deadly disease that causes many other secondary diseases that threaten your cat's life. As a pet owner, it is your responsibility to keep your pet as trim and healthy as possible, as just it's a parent's responsibility to keep a child healthy.



Effects of Obesity

Overweight cats, like overweight humans, are generally less healthy and have shorter life expectancies. Because obese cats feel less healthy, they are less likely to tolerate exercise and, if the owner doesn't reduce the number of calories fed to the cat, they become more obese, perpetuating a deadly cycle.

The detrimental effects of obesity are:

- » Cardiovascular disease
- » Insulin dependant Diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes)
- » Hepatic lipidosis (a type of liver disease)
- » Lameness due to arthritis (joints wear out due to carrying too much weight)
- » Skin disease (from not being able to groom properly)
- » Urinary tract infection (due to fat folds of skin collecting fecal debris and bacteria)

Identifying Obesity

Cats vary greatly in their sizes and weights. For example, a Maine Coon cat has a much larger frame and body structure than a small Tonkinese cat. That means that your Maine Coon could be a perfectly ideal weight at 18 lbs, but your little Tonkinese would be morbidly obese at that weight.

Therefore, your veterinarian uses a combination of visual inspection and palpation (feeling the cat) to determine body condition. One of the palpation techniques your doctor will use is feeling the cat's ribs. There should only be a minimal fat layer covering the ribs – they should still be easily felt with gentle pressure.

Physical examinations by a veterinarian are essential to your cat's health. The doctor will rule out any underlying medical causes and will determine the severity of the weight problem.

Does your cat have a large, sagging belly? Does he have difficulty reaching its rear end for grooming? Is it difficult to feel your cat's ribs? Does he get tired and take a rest after small amounts of exercise? If you answered yes to any of these questions, your cat may be overweight.

Causes of Obesity

Studies have shown that cats at higher risk of obesity include: non-pedigree cats, male cats, neutered/spayed cats, indoor only cats, and cats in a single-cat household. Cats require fewer calories after spaying/neutering because their metabolism slows down. Therefore, the type of food and portion size must be adjusted after spaying/neutering to prevent weight gain.



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The main cause of obesity is overfeeding. Basically obesity results from not burning as many calories as you take in. So even if your cat is very active, if he's eating more calories than he's burning, he will gain weight.

Boredom is another cause of obesity. Just like bored humans who snack, cats do the same things. Cats can become couch potatoes, too! That's why it's very important to have scheduled mealtimes and lots of interactive toys to keep your cat's mind occupied.

Killing with Kindness

It's common for owners to want to spoil their dear little kitty friends, but the worst thing you can do is spoil the cat with food. You may think you are spoiling your cat in a good way, but you are actually killing your cat with kindness.

Of course your cat will accept tasty tidbits of table food, treats, and overfeeding with his regular food – cats have no perception of the consequences of being obese. Therefore, if you love your cat so much and want to spoil him, spoil him with attention, petting, regular playtimes, and new toys – NOT food! Keeping your cat at a healthy weight will prevent serious problems later in life, keeping him alive and with you for longer.



Convenience of Dry Food and the Importance of Canned Food

A majority of cats are fed an all-dry food diet due to the fact that it can be left out all day and not spoil, and it's easy to feed. However, cats eating an all-dry food diet are more likely to become overweight (and constipated) than cats eating a combination of canned and dry food. The reason is that dry food is packed with calories and preservatives, and is very energy-dense.

The amount of dry food that will satisfy a cat's caloric requirements for the day is usually a very small amount, so the cat still feels hungry after eating. For example, try spending a day eating candy and chocolate bars instead of balanced meals – even though you are consuming enough calories, your stomach craves more food to fill it. So just as a regular diet of energy dense junk food makes humans obese, an energy dense diet of dry food can lead to obese cats.

The only way to prevent this is to carefully measure out the quantity you are feeding your cat. Your veterinarian can easily calculate how much food your cat should be eating based on his ideal weight and the brand of food you're feeding. Another option to regular dry food is a "light" formula, which contains less calories and more fiber to help your cat feel fuller for longer.

Adding canned food to your cat's diet will also help your cat feel fuller because most canned food is almost 75% water. So it's like having an extra glass of water with your meal – the bulk makes you feel fuller, without adding calories. An adequate water intake and hydration level is crucial for a healthy body (whether we're talking about cats or people), and since cats generally don't drink a lot of water on their own, adding in a canned food to his diet will help a tremendous amount. Canned food is also very important for cats prone to constipation, kidney disease, or bladder disease – the more moisture you can get into your cat, the better.



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The Correlation of Obesity in Humans to Their Pets

Just as there is growing acceptance of human obesity, there is growing acceptance of pet obesity. Owners who don't exercise sufficiently, often don't understand the importance of exercise for their pets. As obesity in humans rises, we will likely transfer that lifestyle on to our pets.

Owners like convenience food for themselves and their cats. More and more people like to snack while doing other things (watching the TV, using the computer) rather than eat set meals at the table. They extend their snacking, food-on-demand, habits to their cats. Snackers usually tend to underestimate the amount of food they eat. Likewise, owners underestimate the amount of calories fed to their cats in the form of snacks. Studies in humans indicate that snacking also affects the metabolism which leads to weight gain. People who are generally less active are less likely to encourage their cats to be active. Fit, active, health conscious owners tend to be more aware of their pet's health needs. Pets' lifestyles tend to mirror the lifestyles of their owners.

Role of Exercise

Indoor cats are at increased risk of obesity due to their general inactive lifestyle. As stated above, bored cats often snack, just like people. They become less active, and laziness in a cat is a hard habit to break.

A few extra minutes each day to help a cat lose weight would be well spent in interactive play and getting the cat into the "exercise habit." Most cats want to interact with you so those extra 5 minutes should be spent on encouraging the cat to take whenever exercise is suited to its age and state of health.

They need plenty of environmental enrichment to keep their bodies and minds active (sounds like kitty yoga, right?). If your cat isn't bored, he's less likely to snack.

Here are a few ideas for interactive play and exercise:

- » Laser pointer toys.
- » Feather and wand toys.
- » Low-calorie treat food hunts.
- » Throwing toys or up and down a flight of stairs
- » Encouraging play on a climbing tree or post.
- » A short walk outside on a harness and leash.



Time to Diet

Your veterinarian will discuss a safe and effective weight-reduction program and will set goals and target weights. Rapid weight loss can put stress on the liver, so a continuous, gradual weight loss plan will be indicated.

The aim is to reduce the cat's daily total calorie intake. This won't be a drastic reduction, but a moderate reduction so that the cat loses weight slowly. Between-meal treats must be cut out. The amount of food given at each sitting is generally reduced or a lower calorie food ("light" food) is given. Smaller portions and more frequent meals (3-4 meals of small amounts per day) will reduce your cat's hunger pangs and make the diet easier to adjust to.



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Dietary management will be needed alongside lifestyle changes – basically less calories and more exercise. In many cases, reducing portions, more exercise, and cutting out the treats will solve the weight problem.

There will be regular weigh-ins, to make sure your cat isn't losing too much weight too quickly, and to make sure the diet is running on target. These weight checks can either be done at the clinic, or by using an accurate home scale (which is discussed later).

There are currently no safe drugs for management of feline obesity in the cat. Weight control programs rely on a combination of managing the diet and altering the life-style of the overweight cat. Increasing the activity level includes more play time with the owner.



Once your cat's target bodyweight is achieved, the diet must be adjusted for weight maintenance rather than weight loss, making sure he doesn't put the weight back on.

The Multi-Cat Dilemma

What happens when only one of the household cats is overweight? The overweight cat snacks more often than its thinner housemates, and is probably eating the thinner cat's rations as well as his own.

Here are a few ideas for dealing with this situation:

- » Feed set meals in separate rooms, and remove uneaten portions after they have eaten their fill.
- » Feed set meals and remove uneaten portions after about 20 minutes – making sure you police the food bowls so the overweight cat doesn't eat the other cat's portion.
- » Put the thin cat's food on a counter or shelf that the overweight cat can't reach. This way you can leave food out at all times for the thin cat, but the overweight cat cannot reach it.
- » Put a baby gate in the doorway leading to the kitchen (or feeding area) with a small hole cut into it large enough for the thin cat to fit through but too small for the overweight cat to squeeze through. Or use without the hole if the thin cat can jump the gate and the overweight cat cannot make the jump. This way you can leave food out at all times for the thin cat, but the overweight cat cannot reach it.
- » Design a feeding box with a hole small enough for the thin cat to fit through but too small for the overweight cat to squeeze through. This way you can leave food out at all times for the thin cat, but the overweight cat cannot reach it.
- » Be creative! Whatever works for you and your cats and still accomplishes the weight loss goal is fine.

At Home Weight Monitoring

An accurate bathroom scale will provide you with a convenient way to weigh your cat on a regular basis. Weigh yourself first, then pick up your cat and step on the scale again. Subtract your weight from you and your cat's combined weight to find the weight of your cat. Remember to weigh yourself first each and every time since peoples' weight can fluctuate a large amount which will give you an inaccurate weight on your cat.