



Photo by Paul Wright, Shooter4Hire Photography

Fat Cats: Dealing with Feline Obesity

By Dr. Susan Little

It may surprise cat owners to learn the most common nutritional problem seen in their pets is obesity. Recent studies show as many as 40 to 50 per cent of pet cats are overweight and the peak time for obesity is during the middle years of their lives. Studies have also shown many owners do not recognize when their pets are overweight.

The cause of obesity is relatively simple: we provide too many calories. Apparently, we are being too good to our cats!

Natural diets

Cats have some unique nutritional requirements. As obligate carnivores (*i.e.* animals that must have meat in their diets), they have adapted through evolution to a high-protein, moderate-fat and low-carbohydrate diet.

Reflecting their heritage, cats are programmed to use protein

for energy and require higher concentrations of some key amino acids found in animal protein to maintain normal body functions. Unlike other species, cats cannot synthesize certain essential fatty acids from dietary components. They require these fatty acids from animal fat in their diet.

The natural diet of cats in the wild is almost totally meat-based, usually consisting of small rodents and birds. This type of diet contains roughly 40 per cent protein, 40 per cent fat and only five per cent carbohydrates.

Cats lack some of the enzymes and mechanisms found in other animals to cope with higher-carbohydrate diets. This does not mean cats cannot use carbohydrates in their diets, for they can indeed do so efficiently. However, excess carbohydrates in a cat's diet are not burned as energy, but are instead converted to triglycerides and stored as fat.



Recent research shows high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets may be a valid option for weight loss in cats.

In addition, high-carbohydrate diets can stimulate the production of insulin in the cat's body, thereby increasing hunger and causing weight gain.

Risks

Obesity is cause for worry because it has been associated with an increased risk for serious medical conditions in cats.

Studies have shown obese cats are five times as likely as cats of normal weight to develop lameness requiring veterinary care. Excess weight puts stress on joints, muscles and ligaments and can predispose cats to soft-tissue injuries and osteoarthritis.

Obese cats also are four times more likely to develop diabetes mellitus, are two times more likely to suffer non-allergic skin conditions (such as dry, flaky skin and feline acne) and are at risk for a potentially life-threatening liver disease called hepatic lipidosis. Avoiding obesity—or treating it effectively should it develop—can minimize all of these risks.

Causes

Many factors affect obesity, including reproductive status, gender, age, level of activity, diet type and feeding style.

Studies have shown neutering or spaying ('altering') causes a decreased need for calories in male and female cats. Neutered male cats require about 28 per cent fewer calories than unaltered males, while spayed female cats require about 33 per cent fewer

calories than unaltered females. These differences should be taken into account when designing a feeding routine and choosing a diet for cats after they are spayed or neutered.

Many cat owners prefer the convenience of 'free-choice' feeding, especially with dry foods. For active cats that easily regulate their own food intake, this is not a problem. However, many indoor cats are inactive and will tend to overeat if food is available freely to them all day.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact most commercially available cat foods today are designed to be highly palatable. It is very tempting for a cat to simply keep eating that great-tasting food until the bowl is empty.

As a result, attention is increasingly being paid to the role of high-carbohydrate diets in feline obesity, especially for inactive indoor cats. These diets provide a high number of calories per day and any calories not burned off in exercise or used for basic body functions will be stored as fat.

Controlled diets

The traditional choices for feline weight-control or weight-loss diets have been low-calorie, high-fibre diets. However, while this kind of diet can induce weight loss in obese cats, lean muscle mass is often lost as well. It is difficult to maintain permanent weight loss with these diets unless strict calorie reduction is maintained.

Recent research shows high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets may be another valid option for weight loss in cats. Those consuming these "Catkins" diets—so named after the popular Atkins diet plan for humans—will lose weight, but maintain lean body mass. Considering the evolutionary history of the cat, this approach makes sense, as it most closely mimics a cat's natural carnivorous diet.

Canned foods generally meet the requirements of a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet better than dry foods. This is because the manufacturing process for dry diets requires higher carbohydrate content.

Major pet food manufacturers are now producing diets that meet these

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BODY CONDITION SYSTEM

- | | | |
|------------------|----------|--|
| TOO THIN | 1 | Ribs visible on shorthaired cats; no palpable fat; severe abdominal tuck; lumbar vertebrae and wings of ilia easily palpated. |
| | 2 | Ribs easily visible on shorthaired cats; lumbar vertebrae obvious with minimal muscle mass; pronounced abdominal tuck; no palpable fat. |
| | 3 | Ribs easily palpable with minimal fat covering; lumbar vertebrae obvious; obvious waist behind ribs; minimal abdominal fat. |
| | 4 | Ribs palpable with minimal fat covering; noticeable waist behind ribs; slight abdominal tuck; abdominal fat pad absent. |
| IDEAL | 5 | Well-proportioned; observe waist behind ribs; ribs palpable with slight fat covering; abdominal fat pad minimal. |
| TOO HEAVY | 6 | Ribs palpable with slight excess fat covering; waist and abdominal fat pad distinguishable but not obvious; abdominal tuck absent. |
| | 7 | Ribs not easily palpated with moderate fat covering; waist poorly discernible; obvious rounding of abdomen; moderate abdominal fat pad. |
| | 8 | Ribs not palpable with excess fat covering; waist absent; obvious rounding of abdomen with prominent abdominal fat pad; fat deposits present over lumbar area. |
| | 9 | Ribs not palpable under heavy fat cover; heavy fat deposits over lumbar area, face and limbs; distention of abdomen with no waist; extensive abdominal fat deposits. |



Chart courtesy Dr. Susan Little; reprinted with permission of Purina.

requirements, including Hill's Prescription Diet m/d, Royal Canin Calorie Control and Purina Diabetes Management.

Weight-loss programs

The first steps in planning a weight-loss program are to identify your cat's current body condition and to check for any obesity-related medical conditions. Your veterinarian will want to perform a thorough physical examination, determine your cat's body condition 'score' and carry out some basic diagnostic testing with blood and urine samples.

Defining 'obese' depends on the individual cat. In general, cats are considered overweight when they weigh 20 to 25 per cent above their ideal body weight. For further assistance, Purina has developed a scoring system (see chart at left) that rates a cat's body condition on a scale from one to nine. A score of five is ideal, while lower scores indicate the cat is too thin and higher scores indicate the cat is overweight.

Next, your cat's current diet and living conditions are evaluated. Changes may be made to the type of food, how it is fed (e.g. several smaller meals, rather than free-choice feeding) and the quantity provided. You may be asked to measure the amount of food you feed your cat daily and to keep a 'food diary.' Treats and table food may be restricted and an exercise and play program may be recommended.

Carnitine, an amino acid, has shown some promising results for its ability to increase lean muscle mass and accelerate weight loss in obese cats. The major dietary sources of carnitine are meat and dairy proteins. Your veterinarian may suggest carnitine supplementation of 250 to 500 mg per day as part of your cat's weight-loss plan.

Your veterinarian will also schedule several follow-up visits to weigh your cat, discuss its progress, answer any questions you may have, solve problems and make any necessary adjustments to the diet.

Environmental enrichment can help a cat become more active and expend energy to obtain its food. For example, the food can be distributed throughout the house in multiple dishes, instead of one location.



"Frankie." Photo by Lori Suffern, Aurora, Ont.



Recent studies show as many as 40 to 50 per cent of pet cats are overweight and the peak time for obesity is during the middle years of their lives.

Typically, safe weight-loss programs for cats are planned over a three- to six-month time frame, allowing for about one per cent loss of starting body weight per week. Very obese cats may require up to one year to adjust safely to their ideal body weight. It appears that slow, steady weight loss results in a better chance your cat will maintain its new lower body weight in the long term.

Most importantly, owners and their families must be committed to the weight-loss program and try to avoid getting discouraged if things don't go smoothly from the start. It takes time for cats and owners alike to adjust to changes in lifestyle, particularly changes involving food.

The eating environment

Boring indoor environments can be a contributing factor to obesity in cats. In the wild, a cat must expend energy in hunting to eat, so it has an active daily routine. In our homes, on the other hand, a cat simply wanders over to its food bowl to eat.

Environmental enrichment can help a cat become more active and expend energy to obtain its food. For example, the food can be distributed throughout the house in multiple dishes, instead of heaped in one bowl in one location. Some owners

become very inventive and hide the food under overturned disposable bowls or cups throughout the house.

Other items that can be provided to increase activity include climbing towers, window perches, scratching posts and cat toys. Owners should also try to arrange two daily 10-minute sessions of active play with their cats, using appropriate and interesting toys.

Prevention

In dealing with feline obesity, prevention is the best approach. Cat owners, veterinarians and clinic staff can all play a role in disseminating the information necessary for this purpose.

From your very first visit with your new kitten, ask your veterinarian about food choices and feeding techniques. As your kitten grows, the type of diet and feeding methods will require adjustment. In many cases, you may be advised not to allow free-choice feeding, even for kittens, but to instead feed several small meals per day. This provides better control over your cat's total daily calorie intake and prevents overeating.

We certainly know from research in humans and other animals that overfeeding during the growing years can predispose an adult to obesity, due to the increased number of fat cells produced. Veterinarians and pet food manufacturers can readily provide charts and information to help calculate the correct amount of food to feed your cat daily throughout various stages of its life.

It is also important to start off on the right foot and incorporate exercise and environmental enrichment from the first day. With the help of your veterinarian, you can prevent obesity and its associated health problems and ensure your cat lives a long and healthy life. 🐾

Dr. Susan Little is an Ottawa-based veterinarian who is board-certified in feline practice. She recently helped write the Cat Fanciers' Association's Complete Cat Book, now available at major bookstores. For more information, visit www.cfa-inc.org/catalog/books.html.

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