

FELINE OBESITY

Many owners are surprised when they are told that their cat is fat. In fact, obesity is the most common nutritional problem today with as many as 50% of household cats falling into the overweight category. While we can't blame a cat for indulging on the tasty side of life, it is important to understand that excess pounds can lead to a multitude of health risks.

There is no single number used to determine whether a cat is overweight. An ideal body condition varies depending on the individual cat's age, gender, activity level, diet type and feeding style. The convenience of free choice feeding is not generally a problem if the cat is active enough to burn off the calories. However, many indoor cats show just enough activity to get to the food bowl and eat before heading back to the sunbeam for a nap. In addition to this, commercial cat foods are formulated to be irresistibly delicious!

Commercial cat foods are formulated to be irresistibly delicious! Cats can utilize some carbohydrates from their diet; however excess carbs are not burned as energy. Instead they are converted to triglycerides and stored as fat. Protein is the main energy source and cats require higher concentrations of certain amino acids to maintain normal body functions.

As with many species, obesity plays a major role in potential health risks such heart conditions and joint problems. Excess weight puts stress on joints, muscles and ligaments and can predispose cats to soft-tissue injuries and osteoarthritis. Obesity in cats is associated with diabetes mellitus and has been known to increase the severity of pre-existing feline asthma.

Unique to cats is a life-threatening fatty liver disease - hepatic lipidosis. This condition generally occurs in obese cats after a period of fasting and results in fat accumulating in the liver. The disease progression is rapid and aggressive and the consequences are often fatal.

Along with these more serious health issues are the everyday maintenance challenges that a fat cat faces. The large physical size of an obese cat limits the ability to groom sufficiently and often results in matted, greasy fur or dry, flaky skin. Your cat may encounter difficulties when performing simple tasks like jumping or stair climbing. This can not only reduce your cat's desire to move around the house, but can provide an all around lethargic and depressed attitude.

Tips on reducing your cat's weight:

Measured meals - Rather than a continuous supply of food, it is a good idea to decide how much food your cat needs each day and divide that up into 2-3 portions. You may need to consult your vet to decide what an appropriate amount of food is for your cat as these values vary among individuals. These divided portions can then be fed throughout the day to provide the cat with a relatively constant energy intake. Any change should be done gradually and needs an adjustment period, but before long you and your cat will have it down to an art.

Food type - Common weight control diets help with feline weight loss, however many also reduce the cats lean muscle mass. Recent research shows high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets may be an alternative for weight loss in cats by reducing weight while maintaining lean body mass. Again, consulting with your vet regarding a suitable diet for your cat is recommended.

Encourage your cat to be more active - By providing some favourite toys, levelled scratching posts or other climbing devices you could help your cat burn off a few calories every day. You could even try distributing the meals in different locations so the cat has to be more active to get to the food dish.

Avoid treats – Limit the amounts of treats and table foods that you give. Don't worry, the cold stares and kitty obscenities directed at you will subside with time!

Don't expect immediate results - Typically, safe weight-loss programs for cats take anywhere from three- to six-months. Very obese cats may require up to one year to safely adjust to their ideal body weight.