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Weight Reduction in Cats

Weight loss is tough for anyone - two- or four-legged! However, losing weight and getting in shape can add not only years to your cat's life; it can also make those extra years more enjoyable. Helping your furry feline to shed a few pounds may be easier than you think. It simply requires - a commitment to weight loss and fitness, attention to details and the assistance of your veterinary healthcare team.

Why should my cat lose weight?

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As little as two pounds above the ideal body weight can put your cat at risk for developing some serious medical conditions. Unfortunately, when a cat is overweight or obese it no longer is a question of "if" your cat will develop a condition secondary to the excess weight but "how soon and how serious!" Some of the common disorders associated with excess weight include:

- Type 2 diabetes - an obese cat is three times more likely to develop this serious disease as a cat of normal weight
- Heart disease
- Osteoarthritis (arthritis)
- Increased frequency of joint injuries
- High blood pressure
- Some forms of cancer - especially intra-abdominal cancers



Overweight and obese cats usually have shorter lives than their fitter, normal weight counterparts do. Heavy cats tend to physically interact less with their families and are less energetic and playful. Because they tend to lie around more, it is easier to overlook early signs of illness, since we may attribute their lethargy to their "normal laziness." We are just now learning how serious and threatening a few extra pounds can be for both humans and our cuddly companions.

How should I begin a weight loss program for my cat?

Theoretically, weight loss seems simple enough: fewer calories in plus more calories out equals weight loss. Unfortunately, it is not as simple as that. You should never put an obese cat on a diet without veterinary supervision.

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The cat's physiology is different than humans or dogs and if they do not eat for as little as two consecutive days, they can develop a life-threatening form of liver disease known as *hepatic lipidosis* (also called fatty liver syndrome). Your veterinarian will perform a physical examination of your cat, and will likely recommend some diagnostic testing to ensure that there are no underlying diseases or obstacles to weight loss for your cat.

How much should I feed my cat to promote weight loss?

In order to answer this question, your veterinarian will examine your cat to determine its ideal body weight, based on its body size and build. Formulas and charts have been developed to assist your veterinarian in determining this weight, as well as the number of calories required to achieve it safely. In general, the average domestic cat should weigh approximately 8-10 pounds (3.6-4.4 kg). Based on your cat's degree of obesity, your veterinarian may recommend an initial target weight that is higher than the ideal weight. For example, if your cat is 18 pounds (8.2 kg), you can calculate its ideal weight to be 10 to 12 pounds (4.4-5.5 kg), but a more realistic initial goal may be 15 pounds (6.8 kg). After the cat loses this weight, a re-evaluation will be made to determine whether further weight loss is needed. The formula for weight loss in cats is based on the resting energy requirement (calorie requirement for a cat that is not performing any physical activity), or RER, calculated as follows:

- $RER \text{ in kcal/day} = [70 \times (\text{ideal weight in kg})]^{3/4}$ or $[70 \times (\text{ideal weight in kg})]$ to the $3/4$ power

or

- $RER \text{ in kcal/day} = 30(\text{body weight in kilograms}) + 70$

For weight loss in cats, you should feed about 80% of the RER, or multiply RER times 0.8. To save you making the calculations, the following chart can be used:

Ideal weight (lbs)	Calories(kcal) to feed to meet 80% RER per day
8	180
10	210
12	230

Note: This is a general guideline only and is not meant as a substitute from your veterinarian's specific recommendations. If your cat fails to lose weight on this amount of calories, the total will need to be reduced further.

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The amount of food that is necessary to provide this number of calories will depend on the calorie content of the food. For reducing formulas available through your veterinarian, this information will be on the label, and a member of your veterinary team help you determine the appropriate amount to feed. If you choose to use an alternate source of food that does not have this information on the label, you will need to contact the manufacturer to get it.

For many cats, the best way to lose weight is with a canned diet food fed several times per day, rather than leaving food down all of the time. One of the reasons canned diet foods work better is because our finicky felines often prefer wet food to dry. Eating meals rather than nibbling all day long discourages eating out of boredom or just for the sake of eating. It is vital that you count calories and measure the amount fed when entering into a weight reduction program. Feeding too much will result in no weight loss and feeding too little can result in serious health consequences such as hepatic lipidosis.

How quickly should I introduce the new reducing diet to my cat?



When you are introducing a new diet to your cat, you should allow 1-2 weeks for the transition. Start by mixing $\frac{1}{4}$ of the new diet with $\frac{3}{4}$ of the old diet for two to four days. Then increase to half-and-half for another two to four days and then give $\frac{3}{4}$ of the volume as the new diet for a final three to five days before completely switching to the new diet.

"... a flavoring such as ketchup, oregano or garlic, a small amount of salmon or tuna juice..."

To enhance the palatability of the diet food, try warming the food, adding a flavoring such as ketchup, oregano or garlic, a small amount of salmon or tuna juice or an omega-3 fatty acid supplement.

If your cat refuses to eat the new diet, or if you have any concerns during this initial introduction period, do not hesitate to contact the veterinary clinic for advice.

What suggestions do you have to encourage my cat get more exercise?

In an ideal world, we would take a jog with our cats, but we certainly do not live in that world! Getting our cats to engage in aerobic activity is not just difficult - it goes against their very nature. Cats were not designed to function as scavengers and cooperative hunters the way humans and dogs evolved. Instead, cats evolved as stalkers who expended very little energy in seeking their prey and seldom strayed far from their territory. When cats come across prey, they burst into an intensely anaerobic and short-duration pursuit. Most wild cats pursue their prey at top speed for less than a minute. Once this activity is complete, they require hours to recover for the next hunt.

Our domestic cats are simply smaller versions of these wild felines. While we may take our dogs out for a brisk walk or jog, few cats are interested in this sort of activity. Cats prefer the hundred-yard dash to the marathon. To complicate matters further, cats have evolved to eat a diet based on meat as opposed to humans and dogs that can get their nutritional needs from a combination of vegetables and meats.

"Since cats are *obligate carnivores*, the dietary rules for people do not apply."

Since cats are *obligate carnivores*, the dietary rules for people do not apply. Many cats will lose weight more effectively on a high protein, low carbohydrate diet for this reason.

You will need to use your ingenuity and creativity to convince your chunky cat to get more exercise. Some simple ideas include:

- Moving the food bowl to different locations in the house, such as upstairs or downstairs and rotate it so that the cat always has to walk to get to its food bowl. Cats are smart and if the food bowl moves upstairs, they will start relocating upstairs, too.
- Moving the food bowl as far away from your cat's favorite haunts as possible. Again, many fat cats will sleep and lounge around near the food bowl so they do not have to go far to get a snack.
- Investing in special "feeding balls" that require your cat to roll them around in order to get pieces of food as a 'reward'. With these interactive objects, you fill them with a specific amount of dry food and it is up to the cat to work at getting the food out!
- Setting aside play times for your cat, and use feather toys, laser pointers, paper or foil balls, or anything else that your cat finds interesting to chase. Try to play with your cat for ten minutes twice a day. You can do this while you eat, watch

television or even read. Some of the numerous toys that move and squeak may be entertaining to your cat. For many cats, variety is important, since what is exciting today may be boring tomorrow.



How often should my cat come in for a recheck or weigh-in?

After you have put your cat on a weight loss program, it's critical that you determine if it's working for your cat.

"Each cat is an individual and may require adjustments in the recommended diet or routine before finding the correct approach."

Each cat is an individual and may require adjustments in the recommended diet or routine before finding the correct approach. In general, your cat should be weighed at least monthly until the ideal weight is achieved. If there is no significant weight loss within one month (typically about one pound or 0.5 kg), then the program will need to be modified. Sometimes making only a slight change can deliver significant improvements.

When my cat is hungry, she pesters me until I feed her. Do you have any suggestions?

It's often easier to give in to the cat that wakes you at four in the morning to be fed or the cat that meows incessantly or head butts you until you feed them! These cats have trained us well and know exactly which buttons to press when it comes to getting their way! Here are some tips for handling the pesky Persian or the insatiable Siamese:

"...auto-feeders are nothing more than unlimited candy machines to a fat cat."

- Do not use a self-feeder. While this seems obvious, auto-feeders are nothing more than unlimited candy machines to a fat cat.
- Pet your cat or play with it when it begs for food. Many cats substitute food for affection so flip the equation and you may find that playtime displaces mealtime.
- Feed small meals frequently - especially give a last feeding for those cats that like to wake you up in the wee hours begging for more goodies - divide the total volume or calories into four to six smaller meals - whatever you do, don't feed extra food
- When the bowl is empty and your cat is pleading, add a few kibbles to the bowl. A few means only a few - not a handful.
- Offer fresh water instead of food. If your cat is eyeing the empty food bowl, a drink of cold, fresh water may satisfy that craving.

I have more than one cat, but only one is overweight. How can I feed them different foods?

While you may come up with more creative solutions to this problem, here are a few suggestions to start:

- Feed the cats separately - this is the ideal solution for multi-cat households. Feed the fat cat its diet in one room while feeding the other cat its food elsewhere. After allowing them to eat for a specific time, generally fifteen to thirty minutes, remove any uneaten food until the next feeding.
- Feed the normal weight cat up high where the fat cat can't go.
- Never leave food out while you are away. You can't control who eats what when you're not around!

How long will my cat need to be on a diet?

"Most cats will achieve their ideal weight within six to eight months."

Most cats will achieve their ideal weight within six to eight months. If the process is taking longer than this, something needs to be changed. A healthy weight loss would be close to one pound per month. Some cats may need to go slower while others may shed the pounds more quickly.

For most cats, the secret to weight loss is a dedicated, committed and concerned family. Cats don't understand that their excess weight is killing them. It is up to us as good stewards to protect them from harm and not inadvertently contribute to their premature death or development of debilitating diseases. Together - your veterinary healthcare team, you and your family - we can help your cat achieve a healthy body weight and condition safely and successfully.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM
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