

Feline Obesity: The Unspoken Epidemic



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According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, nearly 60 percent of cats are overweight or obese.¹ Why is feline obesity so prevalent?

While society in general has become more aware of the benefits of exercise and healthy eating for humans and dogs, unfortunately this mindset doesn't always carry over to cat ownership. Many owners lack a basic understanding of how many calories cats require. Rather than measure the food, they simply fill the food bowl to the brim without realizing they are overfeeding. I've also seen cases where owners fail to consider how many calories their cat is getting from treats. While treats can provide an easy way for pet owners to interact with cats, they are not meant to be a dietary mainstay. Over time, a picky cat fed too many treats may refuse to eat its regular diet.

How can the cat obesity trend be reversed?

It starts with education, ideally before the cat becomes a sedentary adult. Obesity isn't an overnight process, so as cats slowly add pounds over time, their owners can lose the perception of what a healthy body condition should look like. Reviewing the body condition score (BCS) chart during routine checkups can help reinforce to owners what "ideal" looks and feels like.

Cats also need to learn to be active. Owners can teach them by starting early and encouraging playful interactivity. It's easy with kittens – they're cute and energetic and the relationship is new. The challenge lies in continuing to set aside time for play as cats age and their owners get busy. Just five minutes of play, twice a day, can help buck the sedentary trend and may help reduce the risk of obesity. While owner engagement is best, using an interactive feeding apparatus or toy can also help get the cat moving and burning calories.

When working with an obese feline patient, what are your priorities as you formulate a feeding plan?

First I want to know exactly how the animal is currently being fed. That includes making a comprehensive list of diet and treats, as well as understanding their feeding behavior.

Does the cat beg for food?

If so, focusing on satiety can be helpful. While high protein and minimal fat content are key elements of most weight-loss foods, I may adjust the amount of fibre based on how food-motivated the patient is. A diet with more fibre may help keep cats feeling satisfied longer and may minimise begging between meals.

Does the cat prefer dry food?

Using canned diets may help enhance gastric filling and reduce voluntary energy intake in cats.² If wet food isn't an option, encouraging water intake in other ways may help cats feel satiated. This can be achieved with high-moisture diets or even a special treat that includes as much water as possible. If a diet with higher sodium levels is not contraindicated for the patient, I may also look for that to help increase water intake.

Does the cat eat just twice a day?

Multiple small meals per day more closely mimics the natural feline diet than two big meals. Automated feeders can make this an easy process, particularly if the cat is home alone during the day. This also takes the human element out of managing weight loss; the owner doesn't feel guilty for feeding less and the cat doesn't direct their potential frustration on the pet owner.



Encouraging pet owners to continue playing with their cats as they age is an important strategy in preventing feline obesity.



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Overcoming Obstacles to Feline Weight Loss



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Once a cat becomes obese, weight loss can be difficult to achieve. Not only does the sedentary nature of indoor cats—especially overweight cats—reduce their energy expenditure, but the reluctance and resistance of owners to reducing caloric intake can be challenging.

Change the food; ease the guilt

When asked to reduce their cats' feeding portions, owners often feel guilty because the volume seems so small. Prescribing a weight loss diet, such as Purina® Pro Plan® Veterinary Diets OM Obesity® Management Feline Formula, can help owners overcome that reluctance. Because a diet like OM is less calorically dense than many over-the-counter cat foods, cat owners feel more comfortable with the portions they can feed.

Owners also need to understand that the feeding recommendations we provide for their cats are not set in stone. We start with a diet and portions we hope will lead to weight reduction; however, if weight loss does not follow and we have ruled out complicating medication conditions—as well as the possibility that the owner is feeding too many treats—we may need to adjust our recommendations by changing the diet or further reducing food volume.

Owner advice: Consider the consequences

If I suspect noncompliance, I emphasize to the owner that there may be serious consequences if the cat doesn't lose weight. These include the development of comorbidities such as diabetes mellitus, lameness and hepatic lipidosis, as well as increased risk of developing lower urinary tract disease.^{1,2}

I also bring cost into the discussion when discussing weight loss. I caution owners that a fat cat can be an expensive cat, and that development of a conditions such as diabetes will cost the owner in terms of medication, special diets, monitoring supplies and veterinary care.

Slow and steady wins the race

In my experience, it is common for a cat to lose a modest amount of weight, e.g., a quarter to half a kilogram, on a therapeutic diet, then stop or hit a plateau. I remind owners that even a small, incremental loss can be significant for the cat, and that a half kilo loss still equals a significant percentage reduction. While my hope is that the initial success will motivate owners, I remind them—as well as myself—that even small losses are preferable to weight gain.

Make Obesity Prevention a Priority

Ohad Barnea, DVM

One of the most important steps we can take to reduce the risk of a patient developing health conditions associated with excess weight gain is to educate clients on how to prevent obesity in the first place.



Kittenhood: Start early, start wet

Feeding a wet diet has several important benefits for cats. Not only can the higher moisture content of the food help nutritionally manage cats with lower urinary tract diseases, but the lower caloric density of wet foods and high protein levels can also help with lifelong weight management. If cats are fed exclusively dry foods from kittenhood on, they may be reluctant to accept a wet diet later.³ For that reason, I advise kitten owners who are able to feed wet food to introduce their new pets to wet diets early in life.



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Successful Weight Loss Takes a Team Approach



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As a veterinarian, you're well aware that weight loss can be difficult for overweight or obese feline patients—especially when cutting calories results in “hangry,” negative cat behavior. As a behaviourist, I advise veterinarians and owners to find ways to increase cats' activity level while taking steps to manage food intake and keep them enriched. Calorie reduction doesn't need to mean an unhappy cat, as long as variety—in both play and nutrition—is a priority.

Feed smaller, wetter and more frequent meals

Ad libitum feeding increases risk for obesity.¹ However, when cats are put on a weight-management diet and given all of their allotted food at once, the tendency is to eat it quickly in fewer but larger meals.² It is incumbent on pet owners to feed multiple small meals to help cats maintain their normal feeding behavior pattern when food is restricted. For pet owners who are gone for extended periods, using timed feeders that dispense small dry-food meals throughout the day can be helpful.

Reducing calories while maintaining food volume can also be achieved by feeding less energy-dense food. An easy way to do this is to introduce wet food into the diet. It has a higher moisture content and lower caloric density than dry food. Always stress to clients that any diet transition or new food introduction should be done gradually.

Cut calories post-neutering

One of the most significant times in a cat's life for preventing weight gain is after spaying or neutering. A neutered cat will increase food consumption almost immediately after the procedure if allowed to eat ad libitum. Post-neutering increases in insulin and leptin that suppress the normal food-intake response and render the cat less able to regulate hunger may play a role.⁴ Neutering/spaying may also reduce the cat's resting metabolic rate, due to decreases in estrogen and androgens.⁵ While it is important to continue feeding a diet formulated for growth until one year of age in most cats—and to avoid restricting calories in cats under 6 months of age—body condition should be carefully monitored post-neutering and caloric intake reduced as appropriate.

Leverage the cat's natural hunting instincts

While the easiest way to feed cats is to simply put out a bowl of food and let them eat what they want, free-choice feeding can be associated with weight gain. Cats are hunters by nature, so feeding small amounts of food in different locations, using feeding toys or even tossing pieces of kibble that cats can chase are easy ways to nurture instinctive behavior while keeping them more active. Owners should also be realistic when assessing their cats' activity levels. The recommended feeding portions listed on pet food packaging provide a significant range in volume. The higher end of the range typically should only be fed to active and/or intact cats. Most indoor cats are simply not very active, putting them at the low end of the range.

Work with a cat's preferences

Texture and flavour matter to cats, so choosing a weight-management line of diets with flavour and texture options can be important. Fish and poultry are appealing to many cats, while others love beef. Some cats prefer a loaf texture while others like chunks in gravy. Finding the right combinations may require experimenting with both textures and flavours. With your guidance, owners can curate a unique collection of calorie-appropriate foods that their cats enjoy.

Increase activity through work and play

When cats hunt in the wild, they don't usually consume their daily caloric needs in a single hunt. After hunting and eating, cats typically will rest, then hunt again when they feel hungry or the opportunity to hunt occurs. For domesticated cats, reinstating some of these normal rhythmic behaviors seen in nature by having them work for food could help them curb overconsumption. The use of food puzzles in various locations—placed both horizontally and vertically so the cat will have to climb—may also help cats increase their caloric expenditure and promote weight loss.

Play is important. Owners should engage their cats in at least five minutes of play per day and longer if possible. Some cats like lasers (with a small treat given at the end of play to let the cat “win” something) or any number of static toys or ones they can chase. Owners should learn what stimuli encourage their cats to be active and find ways to leverage them. This may help cats shed weight and promote bonding and enrichment for both pets and their owners.

Key Takeaways

- Lack of exercise and excess calories are common culprits of feline obesity.
- Educating pet owners about healthy eating and encouraging active play can help buck the trend of feline obesity.
- Feeding measured portions of nutritious food with a flavour and texture the cat enjoys is important to achieving healthy weight loss and emotional well-being. Adding in play activity can help keep a cat happy and enriched.

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