

# Feline Obesity

- Obesity (the storage of excess fat) is usually caused by excessive food intake and insufficient exercise.
- One of the biggest problems in pets is overfeeding.
- By examining your cat, your veterinarian can determine whether he or she is overweight or obese and help you create a weight-loss program.
- Cats can develop many obesity-related health problems.
- The most effective weight-loss plans involve increasing activity and feeding fewer calories.

### The Basics

Obesity (the storage of excess fat) is usually caused by excessive food intake and insufficient exercise. One of the biggest problems in cats is overfeeding, which can lead to serious problems, including obesity, heart disease, and arthritis, resulting in a shortened life span. Your veterinarian can recommend a proper type and amount of food to maintain your cat's ideal weight.

Obesity is more common in older, less active cats. Cats that are fed table scraps and snacks are more likely to be overweight than cats that are fed only a commercial cat food.

There are many obesity-related health problems (see the box), so it's important to bring your cat in for annual veterinary checkups. By examining your cat, your veterinarian can tell you whether your cat is overweight or obese and how to treat him or her.

Losing weight can help your cat live longer, avoid disease, and feel better, especially on hot days.

### Is Your Cat Overweight?

An average domestic shorthaired cat should weigh 8 to 10 lb (3.6 to 4.5 kg). Here's how to tell if your cat is fat:

- If you put a hand on either side of your cat and firmly stroke his or her sides, you should be able to feel the ribs. This indicates that your cat is probably a proper weight. If you can't feel the

ribs, your cat is overweight. (If you can see the ribs, your cat is underweight.)

- If you stand above your cat and look down at him or her, your cat's waistline should be detectable as a slight indentation just behind the ribs.
- A swinging pouch between your cat's hind legs is a sign that your cat is overweight.
- Your cat's anal area should look clean. Some obese cats have trouble grooming this area.
- If your cat snores or wheezes, it could be a sign of obesity.

### What to Do

Consult your veterinarian before changing your cat's eating and exercise habits. Your veterinarian can recommend an appropriate diet and exercise program for safe weight loss.

When helping your cat lose weight, slower is safer. "Crash" diets aren't appropriate. If your cat gained the weight slowly, he or she can lose it slowly. When on a weight-loss program, your cat should lose approximately 1 lb per month.

The most effective weight-loss plans involve increasing activity and feeding fewer calories. The more convenient you make it, the better the chance of sticking with it.

### Obesity-Related Problems in Cats

- Heart disease
- Reduced life span
- Liver problems
- Labored or difficult breathing
- Fatigue
- Greater risk for heatstroke
- Diabetes
- Ligament and joint problems, including arthritis
- Nonallergic skin conditions

## Common Conditions

### Diet

There are several dietary strategies for helping your cat lose weight. The best way to ensure that your cat is properly nourished is to provide a high-quality, well-balanced food that is appropriate for his or her age and/or condition. When buying cat food, make sure that the American Association of Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) statement is on the bag or label. Your veterinarian may suggest one or more of the following (be sure to use a measuring cup to keep track of how much you're feeding your cat):

- ***Feed your cat smaller meals more often.*** This helps your cat burn more calories and keeps him or her from begging for food. However, don't feed more food per day. Instead, use a measuring cup to divide your cat's daily ration into three or more feedings.
- ***Feed your cat less of his or her regular food per day.*** This strategy is most effective with increased activity. First check with your veterinarian to ensure that your cat will receive the right amount of nutrients.
- ***Instead of feeding your cat less, gradually switch him or her to a low-calorie food recommended by your veterinarian.*** The change should be slow because a sudden switch could upset your cat's stomach. Combine the new food with your cat's usual food in increasingly larger proportions over several weeks until you are only providing the new food.
- ***Don't feed your cat table scraps, which have a lot of calories and could upset your cat's stomach.*** Give feline-formulated treats only on special occasions, such as birthdays, holidays, or good visits to the veterinarian.

### Exercise

You can help your cat become more active and lose weight by scheduling regular playtimes. Consult your veterinarian before beginning an exercise program for your cat. Leaving out empty cardboard

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boxes and paper bags, tissue paper, and catnip may inspire your cat to play. Here are some calorie-burning activities for your cat:

- Chasing (e.g., use string, sticks with attached feathers, balls, or flashlight pointers [never point these at an animal's or person's eyes])
- Climbing a cat tree
- Scratching on posts or pads
- Playing with other pets
- Performing tricks for low-calorie treats (e.g., train your cat to run to you from across the house or climb a cat "tree" when you shake the treat container)
- Trying to remove kibbles from specially designed activity toys

Consider adopting another pet so that your cat has a playmate to encourage activity.

**Cats must eat a meat-based cat food and should never be fed a regular diet of dog or people food.**