



Feline Obesity

Nutritional Guidelines for Overweight Cats

Obesity has become an increasingly common nutritional disorder in cats. Studies show that over 30 percent of cats living in homes are overweight or obese. If your cat is overweight, healthy weight loss and management can improve her health, well-being and quality of life.

Cats become overweight in response to a basic energy imbalance; energy (calorie) intake exceeds energy expenditure. If this imbalance persists for weeks or months, the cat stores the excess energy primarily as body fat and weight gain results. Overweight cats lose their naturally fluid movement and can experience decreased ability to self-groom, leading to an unkempt coat and skin problems. Overweight cats are also at increased risk of developing diabetes and are poor candidates for surgery and anesthesia. There are several factors that contribute to the development of overweight conditions in cats:

- ✓ **Inadequate activity/exercise:** Because most cats live as companions and house pets today, many lead a relatively sedentary lifestyle. In addition, as a cat gains weight, exercise becomes more difficult and less enjoyable, leading to further reductions in voluntary activity and additional weight gain – and a vicious cycle develops.
- ✓ **Excess caloric intake:** The persistent consumption of excess calories can occur from over-feeding a balanced cat food, feeding a food that is more energy dense than the cat requires, or feeding too many treats or table scraps. Keeping food available at all times and allowing self-feeding can also lead to over-eating in some cats.

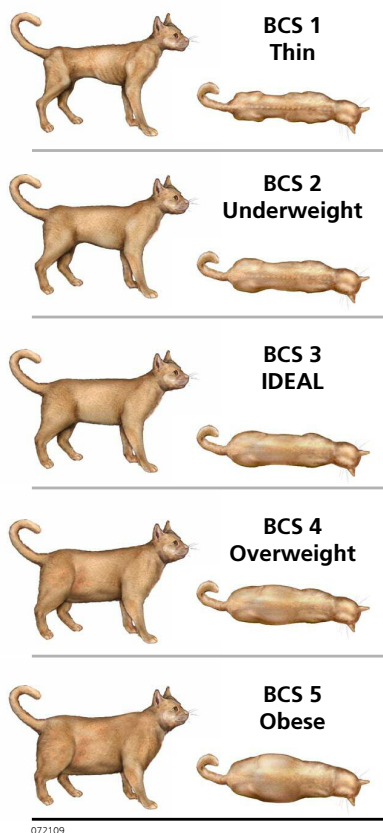
- ✓ **Other factors:** The underlying energy equation that determines weight gain, loss, or stability is

always one of energy in vs. energy out. However there are several additional factors that can influence a cat's energy intake or expenditure and thus his or her susceptibility to weight gain. These factors include:

Age - Older cats are less active and may require less food than younger animals.

Reproductive status - Although neutering does not directly cause weight gain, neutered males and females generally have slightly reduced energy needs and lower activity levels than intact cats.

Breed and temperament - While the breed-specific incidence of obesity in cats has not been extensively studied, Persians and Manx breeds may be more likely to develop obesity. This may be due to differences in activity level (for example, Persians tend to be relatively inactive cats) as well as differences in body type and metabolic rates. Individual animals also vary considerably in body type and activity level, which can affect daily calorie needs and susceptibility to over-weight conditions.



IS YOUR CAT OVERWEIGHT?

Unfortunately, overweight conditions in cats are frequently unrecognized by pet owners. This is not surprising because weight gain is gradual, taking place over many months or years. Owners become progressively accustomed to their pet's "plump" appearance and so may not notice as the pounds add up! Because

overweight conditions can be difficult for pet owners to recognize, nutritionists and veterinarians have





created body condition charts to assist in determining if your cat is above or below her healthiest weight (see chart). Knowing how to assess your cat's body condition can help you to keep her in optimal body condition throughout life. Additional signs of overweight conditions include:

- A layer of fat is felt over your cat's ribs. The ribs may be difficult to feel with the flat of your hands.
- Rounding of abdomen and evidence of abdominal fat pad

DEVELOPING A WEIGHT LOSS PROGRAM FOR YOUR CAT

A visit to your veterinarian is essential before starting a weight loss program for your cat. Your veterinarian can evaluate your cat's weight and body condition and will also examine her for any complicating health conditions. Cats who are 10 percent or more overweight should be fed a food that has been specifically formulated for weight loss or for weight control. These foods are reduced in fat and have fewer calories per cup than adult maintenance foods. They are also specially formulated to ensure that cats receive all of the essential nutrients while consuming fewer calories per day. The food should include high-quality protein to support lean body mass during weight loss and normal (not increased) levels of dietary fiber. Feeding a diet that contains carbohydrates from corn and sorghum can help to manage blood glucose and insulin levels, which is beneficial for overweight cats. Look also for l-carnitine, a vitamin-like compound that promotes the body's use of dietary fat for energy which can aid in weight loss. The inclusion of omega-3 fatty acids and an adjusted omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acid ratio will help to support skin and coat health during weight loss. Iams® and Eukanuba® offer several weight control products for cats that include all of these features. Alternatively, your veterinarian may recommend a veterinary weight loss food such as an Iams Veterinary Formula™ product.

To achieve weight loss, your cat must consume fewer calories than she is expending. This is accomplished by increasing her exercise and decreasing the number of calories that she consumes each day. An effective and safe goal for weight loss in cats is approximately 1% of the cat's current weight per week. For example, if your cat weighs 15 pounds, a 1% loss is about 2 1/2 ounces per week. It is helpful to divide your cat's daily ration into several small meals (at least two per day). If your cat's daily exercise is not changed, a guideline for the amount to feed is to use the package feeding guidelines for weight loss.

Assess body weight weekly. For health reasons, it is important to impose gradual weight loss with cats and to avoid excessive restriction of calories, especially with cats who are obese at the start of the program. If you increase your cat's daily exercise, a larger volume of food can be fed. Here are a few additional tips to help:

- **Introduce a new food gradually:** If your cat's weight loss program includes a new food, make the change gradually to allow your cat to adapt. Mix the new food with your cat's regular food in 20 to 25 % increments, increasing the amount of new food in the mix each day. This method increases the likelihood of acceptance of the new diet and decreases the occurrence of gastrointestinal upsets.
- **Monitor intake and weight regularly.** Provide pre-measured meals and closely monitor your cat's daily intake. In multiple-cat homes, separate cats during mealtime. Evaluate your cat's weight weekly, and adjust the amount of food that is fed as needed to maintain a safe rate of weight loss.
- **Increase exercise:** There are many ways to increase a cat's activity level. Provide indoor climbing structures for your cat to explore and select stimulating toys for your cat to play with. Some cats enjoy learning to fetch a toy while others like to chase laser beams. Rotate the toys that you offer to maintain interest. You can also use your cat's natural hunting instinct to help her lose weight by hiding several small portions of her daily meals around the house. If your cat enjoys being outdoors, train her to walk on a harness and incorporate outside excursions into her daily routine.
- **Avoid feeding table scraps and reduce treats.** Eliminating feeding table scraps is sufficient to achieve the desired weight reduction in some cats who are just moderately overweight. Use playtime, grooming, stroking, or cuddle time on the couch as rewards instead of food treats.

KEEPING THE WEIGHT OFF

Success! Your cat has lost weight, is enjoying the increased activity, and feels great! Now, your only challenge is to keep the weight off. The most important guideline for maintaining your cat's optimal body weight is to feed to meet but not exceed energy needs and closely monitor your cat's weight throughout life. This is accomplished by selecting a food based upon your cat's age, life stage, and activity level. Once a food is selected, provide a pre-measured amount that supports optimal body condition. Adjust the amount of food that is fed each day to best fit your cat's current energy needs.

RD 3003