Getting Your Cat to Lose Weight

It might mean a change in diet and lifestyle, and a little effort on your part, but you can get your cat down to an ideal weight and improve their quality of life.

Calories:

- **Maintenance.** The **average** indoor cat should have 20 calories per pound to maintain weight. The average outdoor only cat should have 35 calories per pound to maintain weight. Indoor/outdoor cats are somewhere in between.
    - o If your indoor cat weighs 10 pounds, then they should be eating approximately 200 calories per day. If they weigh 15 pounds, then they should be eating approximately 300 calories per day to maintain their weight.
- **Weight loss.** If your cat is overweight, you will want to feed for 2 pounds less, or 40 fewer calories a day, and readjust every time your cat loses a pound, until you hit a healthy weight, and then maintain.
- **Differences in metabolism.** Not every cat will fall into the average of 20 calories per pound to maintain weight, just like not every person will have the same weight by eating the same foods every day. Different cats have different metabolism levels, the 20 cal/lb is just a rough guideline. If your cat is not losing weight after 6 months on the above guidelines, then you may need to lower that level.
- **Calculating.** A good way to figure out your cat's current weight/metabolism is to figure out what they eat in a day, and do that for several days in a row, assuming your cat's weight is maintaining. Break that down to the calories per pound that they are consuming, and that will give you a rough idea of their metabolic rate, whether they are consuming 15 cal/lb and are overweight, or they are consuming 30 cal/lb, and are just slightly chubby.
    - o If you free feed and you have multiple cats, you can still figure this out. Put a pre-measured large amount of food in the bowl each morning at the same time, and keep track of any wet food or treats you give during the day.
    - o The next morning, measure how much food is left, and do that for several days in a row to get a estimate of exactly how many calories your cats go through in a 24 hour period on average.
    - o Divide that out by your cat's total poundage, and that will give you a rough idea of their calories per pound intake.
- Finding the calories. If the food you feed does not have the calories per cup or per can listed on the label, almost all of the food companies will have it listed on their websites.

Foods:

- There are definitely different types and quality of foods. Some foods will fill your cat up so they are not hungry as often, and some foods will never satiate your cat, and they will be perpetually hungry, and will drive you crazy. The trick is to find a food that you cat likes that will fill them up, but at the same time, not cause them to gain more weight, and the ingredients in the food play a big part in that.
    - o **Meat based.** Cats are carnivores, not omnivores like people and dogs. They need meat based diets, they do not do well on grain and cereal diets. They will not be satisfied on a grain based diet, and so will eat more. Look for diets that advertise grain free, or that have meat as the first 2 or 3 ingredients.
    - o **Moderate fats.** Have you ever tried a low fat diet? You are never full, always hungry. Same with cats. Fats are not a bad thing, if fed in the right proportion, and fats are one of the things that make your cat

feel full. A lot of the over the counter diets that are labeled for weight management are very low in fat, and do not have enough filler to compensate, causing your cat to always be hungry.

- o **Fiber.** Fiber helps promote more efficient digestion and utilization of calories, so your cat isn't as hungry. However, it can be hard to find meat based diets with high fiber levels, so you can also give supplemental fiber to aid in your cat's digestion. There are a few ways to do this, and this can be done for cats of any age or health as long as they do not have megacolon or end stage constipation issues.
    - ▪ **Canned pumpkin.** You can give your cat a tablespoon of this a day. Most cats do like it.
    - ▪ **Benefiber.** A teaspoon of this daily mixed in moist food will work well, and very few cats will even notice that it is in there.

- **Canned foods.** These are much easier to get your cat to lose weight with. With a few exceptions, canned foods are higher in protein, lower in carbohydrates, moderate in fats, lower in calories than dry food, easy to mix a little Benefiber in, and since most canned foods are 70% water, there is the benefit of increasing your cat's water intake.
    - o We have seen cats lose weight on high calorie canned foods, because they fill up so much faster and are not as hungry, and so don't eat as much.
    - o However – if your cat has had a history of urinary crystal formation, talk to us before starting your cat on a canned food only diet, there are some canned diets that can predispose to struvite crystal formation in some cats.
    - o If your cat is a grazer, you can teach them to meal eat canned food, but it may take a while to get them used to it, so be prepared for some begging until they start eating all of their wet food each meal. If feasible, breaking the meal feeding into 3 or 4 times a day will help.

- **Dry foods.** Canned foods are not always an option. Your lifestyle may not allow for multiple canned feedings a day, and some cats refuse to eat canned food, so you may feed dry foods. Cats can still lose weight on a dry food diet.
    - o The most important thing is to count the calories with dry food. Dry food tends to be higher in calories than wet food, so it may seem like you are not feeding much, depending on what brand you choose.
    - o Don't go for an over the counter weight management diet. These will only make your cat hungrier as they don't have enough fat to satiate your cat, or enough fiber to counteract the low fat.
    - o If you are only feeding your cat a 1/3 of a cup of dry food total per day, and they are still overweight, then you may need to switch to a prescription weight loss diet. Feeding less than 1/3 cup of any dry food may prevent your cat from getting enough daily nutrients.
    - o Traditional prescription weight loss diets are low in calories and fat, but they tend to have very high levels of fiber to counteract the lower levels of fat so as to keep your cat satiated.
    - o Newer prescription weight loss diets tend to be more meat based with the idea that your cat will fill up longer, and not be as hungry. These diets are higher in calories though, so watch those numbers.
    - o Regardless of the diet you choose, you will need to still count calories, do not rely on the recommendations of the side of the bag for weight loss for your cat.

Exercise:

- You can increase your cat's activity level, which will also help them to burn calories more efficiently. While cats are champion couch potatoes, they can be made to move with the right incentive. Here are a few suggestions.
    - o **Stairclimbing.** If you have more than one level in your home, put the litter box on a different level than the food and water. This will force your cat to go up and down the stairs several times a day. Do not do this if you have problems with your cat using the litter box.

- If you are really ambitious, you can meal feed your cat, but a small amount at a time, with you at the top of the stairs giving your cat a tiny amount, then carrying your cat down the stairs, with them having to go back up the stairs for the next morsel of food, and repeating over and over.
  - **Feather toys on a fishing pole for cats.** Most cats can be tempted to play with these and every little bit of exercise helps. Laser pointers are also good at getting a cat moving.
  - **A harness and a leash.** This may take a while, but you can train your cat to walk on a leash.
    - First, find a harness (not a collar) that fits your cat and that is adjustable – you may need to look in the dog section for this at the pet store if you can't find one to fit in the cat section, and then get your cat used to wearing it in the house. They may only tolerate short periods, but be patient.
    - Second, attach a leash to the harness, and then go outside when it is nice out, and just hang out in the yard, while holding the leash end, giving your cat a chance to explore the outdoors, but yet being tethered to you. Do NOT leave your cat outside unsupervised leashed to something – if a predator comes up on them, your cat has no way to escape.
    - Third, and don't expect to go fast, start taking your cat for short walks around the neighborhood, allowing your cat to move at their own pace initially and explore everything. Keep an eye out for dogs, and be prepared to pull your cat back up quickly into your arms if a loose dog does approach. (It is not a bad idea to have some dog repellant in your pocket, just in case to protect your cat.)

Treats:

- Most cats love treats. But, that doesn't mean that they are good for your cat, and they are high in calories.
  - If you want to continue to feed your cat treats, you need to factor those in to your cat's overall calorie intake.
  - About the only treats we recommend are treats designed to help clean your cat's teeth, so they actually have a purpose, or treats used to help get medication into your cat, but again, you need to factor those in to your cat's overall calorie intake per day.

Summary:

- Count your cat's calories. Average cat = 20 cal/lb for maintenance, feed for 2 lb less for weight loss.
- Try to give your cat a meat based diet that has moderate levels of fat, and increased levels of fiber, even if you have to give the fiber separately.
- Canned foods are easier to lose weight with, but not always convenient.
- If dry food is the only food you can feed, do not go less than 1/3 cup per day, if you do, then you may need to go with a prescription diet food. Avoid OTC weight control diets.
- Increase your cat's activity in any way you can without overly stressing them.
- Treats are okay if kept to a minimum and factored into the daily calorie count.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the above, please contact us at All Feline Hospital at 402-467-2711 or info@allfelinehospital.com.

This handout was written by Dr. Shelley Knudsen, DVM