

Feline Weight Loss and Prevention Plan



Obesity in cats is a real problem that can lead to many disease states. In studies, increasing body weight above an ideal weight was found to be associated with a decreased lifespan. In short, obesity in cats is as much of a disease as kidney disease or even cancer.

In addition to obesity being and leading to disease, an overweight cat will struggle to perform the species-specific behaviors that make cats a “Happy Cat.” Some of these behaviors are climbing, hunting, exploring and playing.

So how do our cats become overweight and even obese? We believe this all goes back to the way they would feed naturally. Like their wild ancestor, the North African/Arabian wildcat, the domestic cat is a predator and an obligate carnivore. This means the cat must have meat to survive.

Their unique digestive systems have truly become adapted to a meat-based diet. Cats rely on protein as their main energy source. They have an absolute requirement for the nutrients, and amino acids only found in animal protein sources. Since they are obligate carnivores, they have a reduced ability to digest and utilize carbohydrates. A true carnivore’s diet is low in carbohydrates. Research has looked to un-owned free ranging cats who rely solely on hunting and scavenging for food, and their diets to help support these ideals. When data was collected from the studies it revealed the natural diet of free ranging cats was 52% protein, 46 % fat, and only 2 % from carbohydrates. This data makes us really stop and think about our own little house predators and why overweight cats are sort of the norm these days.

So how does a cat meet these special dietary needs in the wild?

Cats are solitary hunters, just like their wild ancestor. Since they hunt alone, their prey is small in size and they can therefore manage to capture their prey on their own. The average mouse contains 30 kilocalories, cats must hunt, kill and eat around 10 mice a day to meet their daily energy requirement. Not all of the hunting attempts will be successful, and they will burn a substantial amount of energy in the active process. So they may consume around 250-300 kilocalories a day while they are burning a good part of these calories in the hunt. Most dry cat’s food has on average 400 kilocalories in a cup of food and our housecats are not expending that much energy to eat this! Wild cats will spend a large part of their 24-hour day hunting and looking for food. Imagine this lifestyle as we think about the lives of our house cats and the calories they consume.

Cats have also undergone very little in the way of selective breeding compared to dogs, and apart from pedigreed cats we don’t have much control over their breeding. This means their

instinctive drive to hunt is still very strong and part of their natural behavior. Cat's will continue to display this hunting behavior even when they are provided food and are not hungry.

As our understanding of the unique dietary needs of the cat have evolved so have the pet food manufacturers. These companies now understand the special nutritional requirements of the cat and have developed foods to meet these nutritional needs. Now the full nutritional needs of the cat can be met through good pet foods, rather than needing to hunt prey to get these dietary requirements. However, the hunting instinct among our tiny little predators remains.

Cats are now reliant on food fed by their owners and no longer follow their natural rhythms of hunting and eating several small meals throughout day and night. They are restricted to a feeding schedule convenient for their owners that often involves 2 larger meals a day. This is both behaviorally and physiologically unnatural for cats. Even if ad libitum feeding occurs, meaning the cat has unrestricted access to food at all times and therefore can choose to eat small meals throughout the day, their lifestyle can prevent them from regulating their calorie intake for many of the following reasons.

1. Pet food tastes really good and many cats keep eating when they are full.
2. Pet food is easy to eat, it is small and bite sized, and cats can eat it very quickly which can result in overeating.
3. Indoor only cats may become bored and therefore seek food. This coupled with decreased exercise is the perfect formula for obesity.
4. Spaying or neutering has been found to increase food intake in cats. However, these are very necessary for other undesirable behaviors.
5. Multi-cat households often have undetected food competition and thus overeating.

Bottom line is the way we typically feed our cats does not match the lifestyle they were designed for. Whether your cat shows signs of boredom or frustration will vary, but there is absolutely no doubt that all cats could benefit from mental and physical stimulation.

Feline experts in veterinary medicine, behavior and health at International Cat Care ([icatcare](http://icatcare.org)) have put together a feeding plan to do just this!

It's called Five-a-Day Felix

1. Five or more portions a day fed throughout a 24-hour period. These portions should be calculated according to your cats' weight and body condition by your veterinarian or veterinary nurse trained in feline nutrition. The overnight feeding portions can be accomplished with puzzle feeders and timed feeders.
2. Puzzle feeders. Puzzle feeders can be bought in the store or made at home with various household items such as egg cartons, empty toilet paper rolls and plastic bottles. They can be made for all life stages of cats, and you may just need a little time to train your cat to use them. If your cat has never used a puzzle feeder before, please make them as easy as possible to

obtain food from them. You can increase the difficulty as your cat becomes accustomed to the feeder.

3. Change of location. Consider placing a portion of your cats' daily intake in a slightly different location than the last meal. Make use of vertical space when possible. This will be an enriching exercise in hunting that will engage all of their hunting senses. This may not be achievable to the same degree with all cats. Senior cats, or cats with diseases inhibiting their senses may have trouble with this one. If you aren't sure please ask the veterinarian first.

4. Day and night feeding. This is a great aspect of puzzle feeding and timed feeders. This is the time of day most of their natural prey is active (rodents) and cats have excellent night vision. This may reduce attention seeking behaviors in the morning and begging for food in the early morning hours!

5. Keep track of your cat's weight and body condition. Weight is very important as a measurement of health but more importantly is their body condition score. This gives an overall measure of their percent body fat. Your veterinarian or nurse will measure this each time they visit the office.

6. Multi- cat households. All cats in the household should have at least one puzzle feeder of their own and each fed in separate locations.

7. Type of food is important. Make sure the diet you choose is well balanced and not a supplementary food such as treats. It is generally recommended cats eat a variety of both wet and dry food as a way to prevent obesity. Dry foods can be high in carbohydrates. Please ask the guidance of the veterinarian when choosing a diet to feed your cat.

8. Water. Provide your cat with fresh water every day. Cats prefer to drink away from their food. This is a natural behavior in the wild to avoid drinking water potentially contaminated with the dead prey. Place several water sources in different locations within the home. Consider glass bowls as they do not retain a smell like plastic and cats do like to see the water level in their bowls. Shallow, wide bowls are preferred to respect their sensitive whiskers. Some cats like to drink from a moving source so a water fountain may be beneficial.

There is much new research on the horizon as we work to understand the true nature of our house cats. With good environmental enrichment, nutritional and medical care you are on your way to providing for the unique needs of the CAT!