

Weight loss in cats

Weight loss is tough for anyone—two- or four-legged. However, losing weight and getting in shape not only add years to your pet's life, but they also make those extra years more enjoyable. Helping your feline friend shed a few pounds may be easier than you think. It simply requires understanding the importance of weight loss and fitness, paying attention to detail, and seeking assistance from your veterinary team.

Why a healthy weight is important

If a cat is just two pounds over its ideal weight, it's at risk for developing some serious medical conditions. When a cat is overweight or obese, it's not a question of if it will develop a related illness, but rather how many and how soon. Some of the common disorders associated with excess weight include:

- Type 2 diabetes—an obese cat is three times more likely to develop this disease than a normal-weight cat
- Osteoarthritis
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Many forms of cancer, especially intra-abdominal cancers

Veterinarians expect overweight and obese cats to live shorter lives than their fitter counterparts. Heavy cats tend to be less energetic and playful. It's common to think cats that lie around are just lazy, making it easy to overlook the lethargy that results from being overweight or obese. If your cat doesn't run and jump, it might be overweight. But don't worry, your veterinary team can help your cat get in shape.

Start with calories

A weight-loss formula seems simple enough: fewer calories in, plus more calories out, equals weight loss. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. For starters, overweight or obese cats must eat. Their physiology is different than people and dogs, and if they go without food for just two days in a row, they can develop a life-threatening form of liver disease known as hepatic lipidosis. Obese people starting a diet program are also vulnerable to this serious condition. For this reason, never put your cat on a diet without your veterinary team's assistance.

The first place you and your veterinary team will start is by calculating the calories your cat needs. First, the veterinarian will examine your cat to determine its ideal weight. (The average domestic cat should weigh about 8 to 10 pounds.) Your veterinarian will use this weight to figure out how many calories your cat should eat each day.

After you and your veterinarian have determined how much your cat should eat, the next step is deciding what it should eat and how often. For many cats, the best way to feed is to offer canned diet food several times a day. Remember, it's vital to count calories during a weight-reduction program. If you feed too much, your cat won't lose weight. If you feed too little, your cat could get sick. To figure out exactly how many calories are in your pet's food, check the label. If the label doesn't tell you what you need to know, visit petobesityprevention.com and click on "Food and Calories" at the left side of the page.

The art of changing foods

You'll most likely need to offer your cat a diet food if it's overweight. When you're introducing a new food, allow several days for the transition. In general, we recommend gradually adding the new diet over a one- to two-week period. Start by substituting one-quarter of your cat's diet with the new food for two or three days. Then give your cat a diet that's half old food, half new for the next two to four days. Then increase to feeding three-quarters new food for the final three to five days before completely switching to the new diet.

To make dry food more appetizing for your cat, try warming the food, adding ketchup or oregano, or even adding a splash of an omega-3 fatty acid supplement or salmon juice on top of the food. Finicky felines often prefer wet food over dry, so if your cat isn't eating dry foods, canned diet foods may work better.