

## Help for Fat Cats

By Ruth MacPete, DVM

Americans are obsessed with weight loss. Just look at the latest fad diet, exercise trend, fat-burning supplement or weight-loss gadget. Considering that 65 percent of Americans are overweight, this infatuation with getting slim is not surprising. Unfortunately, many people overlook the fact that their own pets need to lose weight. An estimated 45 percent of dogs and 58 percent of cats in the U.S. are overweight.

Overweight pets may be cute, but they are not healthy. As in people, obesity is a growing epidemic that leads to significant health problems, such as arthritis, liver disease and diabetes. According to Ernie Ward, DVM, founder of the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, "the gap between cats that are a little pudgy and downright obese has never been greater." Fortunately, preventing or treating obesity in pets is a lot easier than in people.

### **Know the Causes**

Cats can't order a pepperoni pizza or drive themselves to McDonalds, so why are so many of them overweight? Our cats are overweight for the following reasons.

**Free Feeding:** While giving them access to food all day long is convenient and appropriate for many cats, some eat too much when given unlimited access to food.

**Treats:** Treats add empty calories that can quickly add up, especially if they are given frequently.

**Lack of Exercise:** Although indoor cats outlive their outdoor counterparts, the trade-off is that they tend to be sedentary, so it is easy for them to gain weight.

The best way to tell if your cat is overweight is to take him to the veterinarian. In addition to weighing him, your veterinarian will determine his body condition score by examining his appearance from above, from the side and by palpating his ribs, spine and other bony prominences. The body condition score ranges from 1 to 9, with 1 being very thin, 9 obese and 5 ideal. If your cat is overweight, your veterinarian will help you develop a diet plan.

### **Safe Weight Loss**

The key to helping your cat lose weight safely is to have a plan. It's important to involve your veterinarian in the plan because sudden weight loss can be dangerous, even fatal. Ask your veterinarian to develop a program to help your cat reach his ideal weight. The main treatment for obesity consists of decreasing caloric intake and increasing physical activity.

1. **Reduce Calories.** Most commercially available diets are formulated for the needs of active, intact cats. To help your overweight, indoor, neutered or spayed cat lose weight, most veterinarians recommend decreasing the amount of food by 30 percent and feeding it in

- three to five separate meals. Another option is to switch to a low-calorie, weight-loss diet (many of which are high in fiber) or a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet. Speak with your veterinarian to find out which option is best.
2. **Get them moving.** In addition to having your cat on an appropriate veterinary-recommended diet, exercise can help him lose weight and keep it off. Exercise increases cats' metabolic rate and, thus, helps them burn calories faster. While most people can get their dogs to exercise, many people find it challenging to get their feline friends off the couch. It's actually easier than you might think. The goal is to get them moving, and there are two easy ways to do this.
    - First, promote active play by using laser pointers, motorized mice, cat tunnels and multi-tiered cat trees that encourage jumping. And if your cat is a couch potato, consider buying a cat video to stimulate him. You don't need a Richard Simmons video for cats. Even a tranquil video of birds and squirrels will get the laziest cats off the couch as they try to catch the animals on the screen.
    - Second, make your cat work for his food. You can do this by putting his food on a counter or on a different floor so he needs to climb stairs or jump in order to get to his meal. Of course, make sure he is physically able to do this. If you have any questions about whether your cat is healthy enough to start an exercise plan, speak with your veterinarian.
  3. **Avoid quick weight loss.** Check with your veterinarian regularly to ensure that your cat is losing weight at an appropriate rate. Losing weight too quickly can be dangerous and can lead to hepatic lipidosis, a potentially fatal liver disease.

### **Maintain a Healthy Weight**

Unlike other health problems, obesity can easily be prevented and treated because we control what our pets eat. As Ward sums it up: *"Obesity is the greatest health threat our pets face today. What and how much you feed your cats is the most important decision you make each day regarding their health."*

Follow these guidelines to maintain a healthy weight.

1. **Start by taking your cat to the veterinarian to identify his ideal weight.**
2. **Monitor his weight by weighing him regularly at home.**
3. **Take your cat to the veterinarian for routine visits to ensure that your cat is at the right weight.**
4. **Ask your veterinarian to recommend the right diet for your cat's metabolic needs.**
5. **Promote an active lifestyle by encouraging play.**

Obesity is a serious problem but you can help combat it by having fun with your cat and promoting active play.

Article by Dr. Ruth MacPete. (c/o Cat Fancy Magazine) Dr. Ruth appears frequently on TV shows like The Doctors and blogs regularly for Pet Health Network. To find out more about Dr. Ruth, go to [www.drruthpetvet.com](http://www.drruthpetvet.com)