



Most of us love big cats. Unfortunately, excessive weight can have negative effects on a cat's health. At what point a cat becomes overweight is subjective, but there are common parameters that veterinarians agree upon. This handout discusses criteria and health risks of obesity in cats, and gives you strategies for safe weight reduction in your cat.

Criteria for Obesity:

Because of differences in skeletal size, what an obese weight for one cat may be normal weight for another. Veterinarians agree that few cats have a skeletal frame large enough to comfortably support more than 15 pounds of bodyweight. Indications that your cat has a weight problem include:

A history of steady weight gain.

- A steady decrease in activity level.
- The ribs and other bony prominences are not felt under a nice layer of muscle and are covered by a generous layer of fat.
- Excessive abdominal distension when viewed from the side; extensive fat deposits over the neck, lower back, and base of the tail. Cats store a greater portion of fat in their abdominal fat pad and some prominence in this fat store is normal for cats.
- Inability to groom properly, and keep the coat and bottom clean.
- Impact of obesity on health
- Obesity can shorten and impact your cat's quality of life. Well-documented studies show excessive weight is associated with an increase in medical problems in cats. Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine followed 2,000 obese cats and found:
 - Obese cats are twice as likely to die in middle age when compared to optimal weight cats
 - Overweight cats were four and one-half times more likely to develop diabetes mellitus when compared to optimal weight cats
 - Obese cats were seven times more likely to receive veterinary treatment for lameness associated with joint disease and muscle injury when compared to optimal weight cats
 - Obese cats were three times more likely to be presented to veterinarians for non-allergic skin disease, such as itchy dandruff and local skin conditions that result from reduced ability to reach and groom all parts of their bodies.

Many studies show that obese cats also have a higher incidence of urinary tract conditions (especially lower urinary tract disease), liver disease (especially fatty liver disease), and gastrointestinal disease (especially constipation).

Weight Loss Programs:

Getting weight off your cat will require effort and patience on your part. Weight loss results are affected by individual differences in activity level, metabolism, environment, diet preference, and general health. Some cats burn fewer calories because they are inherently less active. Indoor cats rarely get as much exercise as cats going outdoors and they will eat more out of boredom. Some cats prefer to eat dry foods and gain weight because dry foods have higher carbohydrate content. Health issues, such as arthritis, may limit a cat's activity and result in weight gain.

Cats with similar weights may have different weight reduction goals depending on their overall body condition. For example, one 16-pound cat may be very overweight and may need to lose four pounds. Another 16-pound cat with a larger skeletal frame may need to lose only a couple pounds.

Following a thorough health evaluation, veterinarians at The Cat Doctor will help advise you on a safe weight loss program for your cat.

Basic Concepts:

Ideally, reducing caloric intake and increasing calories burned achieve weight loss. In human circles it's called dieting and exercising. Any of you that have told your cat to "get off the couch and get some exercise" know how well that works. Consequently, the majority of our weight loss strategies for cats involve restricting calories.

Inherent to the concept of calorie restriction is: free-choice feeding must be stopped! Free-choice or self-regulated feeding contributes significantly to obesity in cats. Our staff will calculate your cat's daily feeding requirements for the prescription weight reduction diets available at The Cat Doctor. After calculating your cat's daily caloric needs, you will need to divide the total into two or three carefully measured meals. One strategy is to feed the smallest portion before you go to work (they can't bug you for food while you're at work), feed a second, larger portion when you get home, and a third, larger portion before you go to bed. Measure your cat's daily food amount and put it in a lidded plastic bowl so you are not tempted to feed more. This method also allows multiple family members to feed the cat without overfeeding the daily amount.

Weight reduction programs are more difficult to implement in multiple cat households, especially where cats have different dietary likes and needs. In these instances, segregated feedings should be considered. In some cases you may feed all of the household cats a weight control diet.

Avoid feeding treats or snacks. If you simply must spoil your cat with treats, take this into account when calculating your cat's caloric requirements. Treats and snacks must be limited to less than 10% of the daily caloric requirements.

Low carbohydrate diets (Atkins and South Beach Diets) were popular in human weight loss. Veterinarians have adapted this concept to newer prescription weight control diets. It has also altered our thinking about feeding cats canned versus dry foods. Canned foods are meat (protein) based diets while dry kibble foods are cereal (carbohydrate) based foods. **As a rule, most meat-based canned foods are better than most cereal-based dry foods for weight loss.**

Methods of Regulating Caloric Intake:

Here are three methods of weight management for cats. All three methods incorporate the basic concepts mentioned above.

Method 1: 30 % Reduction Method

You may want to try this method first since it doesn't involve a diet change. Start by determining the amount of food your cat eats to maintain its current weight. Over a 1 to 2 week period, measure the amount of food you put down and subtract the amount your cat leaves each 24 hour period. Average the daily amount consumed during the 1 to 2 week period to determine your cat's daily caloric intake. To facilitate weight loss, reduce the daily offering by 30%.

Method 2: Standard Low Calorie Diets

This classic approach has produced poor results over the years because most of these formulations rely on increased carbs or fiber. Cats are gradually switched to a diet that has fewer calories per volume of food. The net effect is that your cat may consume a similar volume of the low calorie diet as it did its previous diet, and then lose weight. At The Cat Doctor we find that most cats feel hungry when fed these diets and will pester you for more food. We rarely recommend this method.

Method 3: Low Carbohydrate (“Catkins”) Diets

Low-carb weight control diets pack more calories in protein and fat. This “Catkins Diet” approach is usually successful in getting weight off cats. Meat-based canned foods provide the best protein/carbohydrate ratios. Your cat’s caloric needs are also calculated and reduced to facilitate weight loss. Our experience with low carbohydrate diets at The Cat Doctor has been quite positive. Low-carb, meat-based diets may work best because they mimic the cat’s natural carnivorous diet. Feline metabolism is geared towards lower carbohydrate, and higher protein and fat intake. Cats on this diet plan tend to be more satisfied, eat less, and lose weight more comfortably. The Cat Doctor sells a low-carb diet called Royal Canin Satiety. Over-the-counter low-carb options include Wellness kitten formula, Wellness pate or Tiki Cat canned foods without the rice.

Set Reasonable Goals:

Set reasonable goals for weight loss and above all, be patient. Rapid weight loss is unhealthy and must be avoided. Set a target weight loss of no more than 15% of the current body weight. Cats should lose no more than 1% of their body weight per week. Ideally, 16 to 18 weeks are needed to safely attain a goal of 15% weight loss.

Close monitoring is important. Weigh your cat weekly, at the same time of the day, using the same scale. Keep a written log of daily feedings and weekly weights. If your cat shows no weight loss over a two to four week period, consider reducing the caloric intake another 10%. Also, consider changing to mostly or entirely canned food. If weight loss exceeds 1% of body weight per week, increase caloric intake 5 to 10%.

Early in the weight loss program, weekly or every other week weigh-ins and diet counseling with Cat Doctor technicians will get your cat moving in the right direction. Once weight loss is going well, monthly technician appointments are all that is necessary. When your cat reaches a desired weight and body condition, periodic weight checks will ensure your cat is staying on track.

Exercise and Environment:

Ok, maybe it’s not as good as “working out,” but enriching your cat’s environment and stimulating exercise and play may help your cat lose weight and improve its quality of life. Here are some suggestions:

- Schedule time daily to play with your cats. Favorite toys can be brought out and put away after each session. A feather wand (Da Bird) or laser pointer works well for this purpose.
- Purchase different toys, rotate them in and out of use, and store them in a container spiked with catnip.
- Have plenty of window perches and scratching posts around the house. Consider building a catio so your cat(s) can enjoy the stimulation of the outdoors safely.
- Some cats enjoy catnip and may be stimulated to be more active. We know of no ill effects of catnip and it has great entertainment value.
- Consider a feeding ball, which disperses small amounts of dry food as your cat pushes the ball around. We sell the Slim Cat puzzle feeder balls.
- Randomly feed your cat in different areas of the house. This may increase your cat’s activity as he periodically checks different rooms for food.

A word of caution: don't over exercise your cat. If your cat starts to pant, it is time to stop! Frequent, short periods of exercise may be better than a single longer session.

Weight Reduction Program:

Designed specifically for: _____

Current weight: _____

Target weight: (should lose no more than 15% of current weight): _____

Time period to reach target weight is 16 to 18 weeks.

Optimum rate of weight reduction is 1% per week.

Your cat could lose: _____ @ 2 weeks, and _____ @ 4 weeks Diet selected:

% canned: _____ = _____ quantity **

% dry: _____ = _____ quantity

** Feeding canned food will increase likelihood of successful weight loss

Mealtime rules:

- Feed only the prescribed diet
- Divide total 24 hour calories in 2 to 3 meals
- Carefully measure quantity of food with each meal
- Feed your cat away from other pets whenever possible; restrict access to their food
- Avoid treats and table scraps
- Exercise and play: burns calories and takes your cat's mind off the food bowl!

Monitor progress:

- Weigh weekly and record progress
- Use the same calibrated scale
- Weigh at the same time each day
- Record weight to the nearest ounce
- Schedule weekly to every other week weigh-ins and diet counseling with Cat Doctor technicians