

## Getting back in shape

We like our pets to be well rounded but most pet cats have considerably more body fat than cats in the wild. These wild and feral cats are actually closer to the way a fit cat should look. As the human population gets fatter, this affects our pets' health too. We love our pets and like to give them little indulgences similar to those we enjoy, so pets are gaining weight

Being overweight can have lasting consequences. They can even be fatal. Studies have shown that overweight cats do not live as long. They are also prone to illnesses that spoil their quality of life, such as arthritis, breathing difficulties, heart problems and diabetes. There is a genuine risk of killing your pet with kindness.

The way the body works changes considerably in overweight animals. Once an animal is overweight, the working speed of the body slows and they are less active so they do not need to eat much to maintain their weight. It is rare for medical problems to cause obesity in cats.

There is a lot of variation in the energy that different cats require daily, and packeted foods tend to contain an over-generous daily amount.

Don't be alarmed if your cat generally seems to have quite a small appetite, but do consult your vet if there is a sudden loss of appetite. If you are concerned about your cat's weight, consult your vet.

The guidelines below will give you an indication of how to find out if your pet is the correct weight.

## Start young

There is evidence that chubby kittens become fat adult cats so avoid over-feeding your cat when young. Feed a kitten the minimum amount for the body weight recommended on the packet and monitor body shape as your cat grows. Ask your vet to check your kitten's weight and body condition at vaccination time or consult one of our qualified veterinary nurses who are very well informed in all aspects of pet nutrition.

It is best to feed kittens 'meals' i.e. offer food at specific times and pick it up if it is not eaten within 30 minutes. Leaving food down all the time can encourage your cat to eat more and become overweight.

This is a particular risk if you have several cats. Some cats love their food and will happily finish anything the others do not appear to want! Take care not to over-feed your cat on dry foods, which are more concentrated than canned food, but tend to be eaten with great enthusiasm by some cats.

Many of these are intended to be fed as a complete diet, not as a snack in addition to a tinned diet. Don't forget that treats should be viewed as a part of your cat's calorie count for the day.

## Is my cat overweight?

You cannot tell just by weighing your cat. It is, however, a good idea to weigh your cat every couple of months to track weight gain and also any early weight loss, which can be a sign of illness.

Cats are relatively light weight (around 3 to 6.5 kilos so you need a scale calibrated in 0.1 kilogram (or one ounce) increments. Most cats will not sit still on a scale so the best way to do it is to weigh a carrying box, then weigh your cat in the box and subtract the weight of the box.

The only way to tell if your cat is overweight is to look at the animal's body shape and assess the body fat.

Does your pet have a potbelly? Viewed from above, do they have a waist – does the body taper after the ribcage? Can you easily feel your cat's ribs?

No waist, a bit of a paunch, and a well-cushioned ribcage mean it is time to take action.

## The next step

It is best to start with a trip to the vet. A medical check-up is a wise idea before starting your cat on a diet. You can buy good quality calorie-controlled foods from your vet, which are usually the most effective way of helping your cat to lose weight.

It is difficult to achieve safe weight loss in a cat without veterinary supervision, as the way a cat's body works is complex. Simply reducing the amount of normal food given is unlikely to be successful in producing weight loss, as this also cuts down the amount of daily protein provided.

There is growing evidence to suggest that maintaining a high protein diet is an important contributor to achieving weight loss in your cat. The low calorie diets available from your vet are balanced to maintain this.

We run weight control clinics for regular monitoring of your cat's body shape and weight. These clinics are free of charge and are essential to ensure that the diet is working, and that the weight is not being shed too fast and the cat is staying healthy.

## Food diary

Make a record of everything that your cat eats for a few days (including table scraps and treats). This can be valuable in highlighting "extras", such as this cat finishing your other cat's food, or eating scraps put out for wild birds.

## Weight watchers!

With a calorie-controlled food from the vet, you will be advised how much to feed your cat daily. This will be based on your cat's target weight, not their current weight. You are advised to weigh this out daily, at least to begin with. Many dry diets come with calibrated scoops, but it is easy to overfill these. Reduce hunger and keep your cat satisfied by feeding small frequent meals, but do not go above the daily recommended amount for the diet.

If you want to feed treats, these must be taken from the daily ration. Make sure that the cat cannot access food laid out any of your other pets – you cannot leave down a bowl of cat (or dog) biscuits and expect the dieter to behave!

Try feeding a 'light' diet. Work out your cat's ideal (or target) weight. This is usually about 15% less than the current body weight. Consult your vet or veterinary nurse for guidance. These diets are designed to avoid weight gain. They are not 'reducing' diets, designed to promote weight loss. If your pet is not losing weight after two months, consider seeking veterinary advice (and perhaps use a diet provided by the vet). Remember, there are non-fattening treats too – such as playing a game or simply stroking your cat. This type of treat lasts longer than food, and helps to strengthen your relationship. It can also be beneficial for your own health!

## Going to the gym?

On its own, exercise is not enough but it is helpful. Start gradually and be especially careful with elderly pets, particularly in hot weather. Older pets should have a check-up with your vet first. Little and often is the safest way to start. Begin by encouraging your cat to play with toys, and encourage your cat to "work" for dinner by investing in toys in which you can hide food. Do remember to deduct this from the daily food allowance.

Experiment with different toys to see what will interest your cat. Try balls, toys with feathers or string, and laser pointers (never point these at the eyes). Some cats just like to be "chased" by their owners. However, choose toys carefully, avoiding those which are small enough to be swallowed. It is best not to leave string unattended as this can cause serious harm if swallowed.

## How long will it take?

Most cats that look "heavy" are at least 15% overweight. Therefore, a cat weighing 5 kilos may be 0.75 kilos overweight, whilst a cat weighing 8 kilos could be 1.2 kilos overweight. 1% per week is considered a safe rate of weight loss for your cat. The smaller cat in our example above should be shedding 0.2 kilos over one month, whilst the larger should shed 0.32 kilos. Confused? Book in with one of our nurses for a weight watchers appointment.

When your cat reaches the target weight, take another look. Is your pet "in shape", with a waist and a slender tummy? Can you feel the ribs easily?

As the amounts involved are small by human standards, they can be difficult to measure on bathroom scales.

When your cat reaches the agreed target weight, look again. Is your pet back in shape, with a waist and a slender tummy? Can you feel your cat's ribs easily? If not, continue with the diet. If your cat is now perfect, do not slip back into old habits, even though your pet may now be more active. You can increase feeding a little (by around 10%) and weigh your pet every fortnight to check that the animal's weight is not creeping back up.

## The diet isn't working . . . .

All cats are different, so if your cat is not losing weight on the diet, it may be that they are burning calories very slowly. Their daily food intake may be above their energy needs, and should be reduced further.

Consult your vet for advice, but first, check that everybody in the house is sticking to the diet, and that neighbours are not feeding your cat. It only takes one person who feels sorry for the cat and is cheating, to ruin the whole diet! Explain that they are putting your cat's health at risk and may be reducing the animal's life expectancy.

## The high cost of snacking

Outlined below are some calorie equivalents as they apply to the average cat.

- A half-tin of salmon = two doughnuts (to the average person)
- One sardine = a chocolate bar (to the average person)
- A saucer of cream = a burger with chips (to the average person)

If you would like any further detail on the information above please contact us on 01256 764 771 or use the contact page on our website.