



Stanhope Park Veterinary Hospital

TACKLING FELINE OBESITY

Obesity is the most prevalent form of malnutrition in pets presented to veterinary practices, and it is estimated up to 50% of cats in the UK are overweight or obese.

OBESITY is defined as having body fat exceeding 20% of the cat's ideal bodyweight, whilst a cat that is

OVERWEIGHT is defined as having body fat exceeding 10-19% of their ideal bodyweight.

Obesity increases the risks of the development or progression of many diseases, with long-term studies showing that obesity shortens life expectancy.

Disorders for which obesity is a risk factor:

- Diabetes Mellitus
- Lower Urinary Tract Disease e.g. Cystitis
- Joint Stress and aggravation of Osteoarthritis
- Non-allergic Skin Diseases
- Hepatic Lipidosis (*fat deposited by the liver*)
- Decreased Stamina and Exercise Tolerance

Possible complications of obesity:

- Increased Anaesthetic Risk
- Decreased Immune Function
- Dystocia (*problems giving birth*)
- Breathing Problems

DEVELOPMENT OF OBESITY:

Weight gain occurs when cats have a "**positive energy balance**" for an extended period of time, meaning they are taking in more calories than they are using. This excess energy is stored as fat. In most instances the body is able to regulate energy intake so it matches energy use, maintaining the body condition around its '**set point**'.

However, certain factors can affect this set point and predispose the cat to weight gain.

Purebred cats are less likely to develop obesity than moggies. Neutered cats tend to gain weight more easily than entire animals - when a cat is neutered, the metabolic rate decreases by about 20% so neutered cats require less food than intact cats to maintain body condition. Activity can contribute markedly to the energy requirements of an individual, so cats with decreased activity or restricted opportunities to exercise are at greater risk of gaining weight than active cats. Intact cats have a tendency to roam - neutering reduces the desire to roam and the amount of physical activity undertaken by the cat therefore declines.

TREATMENT OF OBESITY:

It is dangerous for cats to lose weight too quickly because this predisposes them to the development of **Hepatic Lipidosis**, a potentially fatal liver disease whereby fat is deposited within the liver as a result of a change in metabolism during fasting. A gradual, steady decrease in bodyweight is ideal. It may take up to a year for a severely overweight cat to reach its ideal body condition.

Our **Registered Veterinary Nurses** can draw up a weight loss programme that combines a suitable feeding and exercise plan with careful monitoring. Bodyweight can be used to assess whether or not a cat has gained or lost weight, but dictating a weight which is ideal depends on the age and breed of the cat. Therefore an assessment of **Body Condition Score (BCS)** is often used to determine if an individual is of an optimal body condition. It is very hard to see weight loss in a cat that you are in close contact with on a daily basis. Regular visits to our weight clinics for weigh-ins and BCS assessment will ensure that weight loss is progressive but not too rapid.

Cats are **obligate carnivores**, and unlike humans and dogs, they must have meat in their diet to survive. A cat's natural diet consisting of small prey mammals would be high in protein and low in carbohydrate. In order for cats to lose weight, veterinary prescription diets have been designed which are high in protein, low in fat, and low in carbohydrate, therefore aiding cats to lose fat whilst maintaining lean body mass (*i.e. muscle*).

It is not advisable to simply feed your cat less of their usual diet – not only will they feel hungry and be unhappy, but all nutrient quantities will be decreased - not just the calories - because commercial diets are balanced according to energy content.



Therefore, a cat on a weight loss plan should be fed a diet formulated for calorie restriction that is fortified with all essential nutrients, so that when it eats the appropriate amount of calories, it still meets its protein, vitamin and mineral needs.

Prescription weight loss diets are also enriched with **L-Carnitine** and **lysine** which help to stimulate the conversion of fat into energy, meaning that less fat is stored in the body. This has a sparing effect on protein - less protein is used for the production of energy, so more can be made available to build muscle.

At the start of the weight-loss programme, it is a good idea for everyone in the household who gives the cat anything to eat, to enter this in a diary every single time. This is invaluable to demonstrate where your cat may be getting the odd extra calorie here and there, which quickly add up!

Once a feeding plan has been devised with your Veterinary Nurse, your cat's daily allowance can be split into several small meals throughout the day, promoting a more natural feeding habit – cats would naturally consume 10-20 small meals in the wild throughout the day!

If feeding dry kibble, be sure to weigh the food on small kitchen scales – measurement cups are inaccurate and can be subjective. You can also use individual kibbles from the daily ration as treats and food rewards, without adding any extra calories onto the daily allowance.

EXERCISE:

Getting your cat moving will greatly increase their chances of successful weight loss. Whilst cats are famous for their time spent “sleeping”, normal behaviour also consists of regular periods of hunting activity, and thus exercise. Interactive play using “fishing rod” toys and laser beams is a great way to get a cat exercising, utilising their natural hunting instincts.

5 - 10 minute play session 2 - 4 times daily will greatly improve energy expenditure, whilst relieving boredom and promoting healthy mental stimulation. Always ensure that such play sessions end with the “prey” landing on a toy that your cat can “catch” as a reward for their hard hunting work, to prevent frustration!

Using puzzle feeders and feeding balls is another fantastic way to get your cat working for their food and therefore burning calories – there is a huge range of items for purchase, or you can make your own for free using cardboard toilet roll inserts and empty egg cartons – see foodpuzzlesforcats.com for inspiration! Even just throwing single kibbles for your cat will encourage movement, and moving food receptacles to different parts of the house every few days will also encourage your cat to actively go and “hunt out” their food!

MULTI-CAT HOUSEHOLDS:

If you have more than one cat in the household, feeding your overweight cat a prescription diet may prove more challenging. Feeding cats in separate areas can help, but if food is left out then the obese cat must not be able to access the other cats' food. This may mean placing food at a height that the obese cat cannot jump up to, or via a doorway only open enough to let the slimmer cats' access. Microchip access feeders are also available which are programmed to open only to certain microchip numbers.

In many instances of multi-cat households, the obese cat is also the most nervous one. Cat behaviour is very complex and can be very subtle, so it can be difficult to perceive a tension between cats within a household. Cats can be known to binge eat when other cats are not present near the feeding bowl. Sometimes owners interpret this as the cat not actually eating much, as they only go to the bowl very infrequently, which is normally when the owners are not there, and they eat very fast. This can result in the overall intake being higher than normal. These cats will benefit from having a “safe” room where they can be fed away from other cats at their own pace.

Looking at **Multimodal Environmental Modification (MEMO)** techniques with your Veterinary Nurse may also help to dramatically improve inter-cat tension.

MAINTAINING OPTIMAL CONDITION:

Once your cat has reached their target weight - or optimal body condition - it may be preferable to feed a “light” or low calorie diet. These diets are designed for the less active cat and do not contain as many calories as the normal maintenance foods. While it is hard to see weight loss in a cat you are watching every day, it is equally difficult to see the early stages of weight gain. Regular weight checks should be continued to ensure that the fat doesn't start to creep back on!

HIDDEN CALORIES	
TREAT or DENTAL PRODUCT:	kCal:
TYPICAL COMMERCIAL CAT TREATS	2 – 4 per PIECE
DENTAL TREATS FOR CATS	1 – 2 per PIECE
CAT MILK DRINK	2 per TEASPOON
2 % MILK	9 per TABLE SPOON
CHEDDAR CHEESE	113 per 28g
CHICKEN BREAST (<i>skinless, roasted</i>)	51 per 28g