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A BEHAVIORAL APPROACH TO FELINE OBESITY

My cat is overweight and I have tried putting him on different diets from the veterinarian but without success– is there anything else I can do to help him lose weight?

Losing weight is often a difficult process and animals, like people, often take weeks or months to shed those unwanted pounds. Feeding a prescription weight reduction diet is certainly a good start in a weight loss program for your cat, but it is important to remember that food intake is only one part of the problem.

Energy expenditure is also important and if you simply reduce the amount of food that your cat is consuming and do not alter the amount of exercise that he is getting you will find that the rate of weight loss is almost negligible.

Encouraging your cat to exercise by playing with him, putting his food in unusual locations so he has to go looking for it, and making him work for his food (e.g. training, foraging toys) will help. Remember, slow weight loss is best for your cat's health.



What are the best ways to encourage my cat to be more active?

Cats are designed to engage in short bursts of activity rather than in long sessions of physical activity and therefore you need to provide toys and games that encourage this sort of action. Games which stimulate predatory instincts are usually irresistible for cats and the use of fishing rod toys which encourage some aerobic activity will be a helpful part of your pet's diet regime. Of course if you provide small food morsels at the end of each chase, this too can help to encourage further aerobic play. A few reward-based training sessions can also be extremely valuable way to not only exercise away a few calories while giving you a better way to communicate effectively with your pet. Call him to come, or teach him to chase a play toy or come to his food bowl on command and your cat will learn a few words, burn off a few calories and enjoy doing it. More details are available in our handout 'Playing effectively with your cat'.

How can I encourage my cat to be more active when I am out at work all day?

One of the most difficult things to do is encourage activity in a pet that is alone for long periods of time, but it is not impossible. There is a wide range of toys and feeding equipment available to stimulate feline activity. Some of the timed cat feeders that can be set at pre-determined times to allow access to food can be useful, and if this is combined with the provision of puzzle feeder activity it can lead to a significant increase in activity. Cat aerobic centers which incorporate hiding places for part of the cat's daily food ration can also be useful. In addition to feeding related activity you can encourage other forms of play by providing toys. It is better to use items that have intrinsic movement, as these will stimulate the cat to play even in the absence of a human operator! Again if manipulation and chase of a toy leads to the delivery of small food treats, further play is encouraged.

I have tried playing with my cat but he is so overweight that playing is simply not on his mind – is there any other way of increasing his energy expenditure?

When cats have become very overweight it can be difficult for them to play and they tend to spend their time either eating or sleeping. In these cases it is important to increase the level of activity associated with feeding and simple changes, such as placing the food bowl in a slightly less accessible location, may be beneficial. Try putting the food bowl on top of a small platform, so that the cat has to climb up to gain access to it, or use multiple bowls spaced around the house so that the cat has to walk from one bowl to the other in order to complete his meal. You may also consider making some homemade puzzle feeders out of plastic bottles so that your cat has to roll the bottle across the floor in order to gain access to the food inside. Some toys are also designed to deliver the food as they are batted, rolled or chased. As the weight loss begins you will find that your cat has more energy to engage in play and other activities but in the early stages feeding time may be your only opportunity to make him burn off some of those calories.

I feed my cat two good meals of cat food every day so why does he keep on asking for treats between meals?

The cat's digestive system is designed to take in multiple small meals throughout the day rather than two meals in twenty-four hours. Often cats learn to consume larger quantities in one or two sittings because they come to realize that food is not available at other times, but their natural instinct is to eat smaller amounts more often and if they can gain access to snacks between meals they will certainly do so. In many cases owners misinterpret the cat's attempts to elicit social



interaction, through vocalization or rubbing, as a demand for food and when the cat realizes that food treats can be elicited in this way it quickly learns to develop this “food soliciting behavior”. In order to decrease this desire for in between snacks you should increase the frequency of feeding and spread your cat’s daily food intake between multiple small meals rather than two main sittings.

My cat regularly asks me for treats and I am worried that he will feel rejected if I stop giving them to him?

As human beings, we see food as a socially important resource and it is easy to project our own perceptions onto our pets and expect them to see things in the way we do! It is very likely that the behavior, which you are interpreting as a plea for food, was originally a request for social interaction and has only developed into a food soliciting behavior because of your response. Once you alter the way in which you feed him, so that he can gain access to his actual diet in multiple small helpings, you can respond to his calling with affection or play and not with food.

This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB

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