

Weight Loss Programs for Overweight & Obese Cats

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Like humans, overweight cats are at risk for health problems and do not generally live as long as cats that are trim. In addition to being at a greater risk for liver disease and [diabetes mellitus](#), overweight cats show greater incidence of arthritis, skin problems, and other medical conditions.

To determine if your cat is overweight, run your hand along his side. If you can not feel his ribs, it is time to start a weight reduction program. If your cat does not have a waist, that is another indication it is time to start a weight reduction program.

A weight reduction program for cats is multi-faceted and should include the following:

Veterinary examination

Certain medical conditions can cause obesity in cats, and any cat with a weight problem should be examined by a veterinarian prior to initiating a weight control program. The veterinarian will determine if there is an underlying cause for the obesity or if there are other medical conditions present, which could complicate weight reduction. The rate of weight loss in obese cats is critical to their overall health. The veterinarian is also a valuable resource in helping you establish a weight reduction program specific for you and your cat. Certified veterinary nutritionists are also a good resource.



When starting a weight reduction program, your veterinarian can help you determine a realistic weight goal and timeline. It is important to understand how long the process may take. In general, a good goal to aim for is 1-2% of the body weight per week. We do not want the cat to lose weight too fast, since rapid weight loss increases the likelihood the program will come back after the weight reduction diet is stopped. In addition, in some cats, rapid weight loss can result in severe liver disease and even failure due to [hepatic lipidosis](#).

Household participation

One of the main reasons weight reduction programs for cats fail is that one (or more) member(s) of the household, or even the neighborhood, is not following the recommendations. Everyone must agree that the program is essential for the life and health of the cat. Each must follow the recommendations regarding diet, treats, exercise, etc., if the program is to be successful.

Diet change

Essential to a good weight reduction program is reducing the calories fed, but how much? Most weight loss protocols for cats recommend feeding 75% of the energy needs your cat would need when she is at her ideal weight. There is extreme variability (up to 20%) in the actual energy of cats of the same weight, since their activity level can vary greatly. For this reason, the cat's response to the weight reduction program is monitored and adjustments made as necessary.

There are two basic ways to cut down on calories. One is to feed less of the food the cat is currently eating. The second is to switch to special weight reduction diets. And of course, with either way, table scraps are a no-no and treats need to be minimized.



Limit access to current food: If your cat will be placed on a weight reduction program that calls for her to continue eating her current food, it is generally recommended that the amount of food fed daily be cut back by 20 to 40%. For example, if your cat is normally fed 3/4 cup of dry food, she should now be fed approximately 1/2 cup. After 3-4 weeks, the progress is evaluated. It may be necessary to cut the amount fed even further. If you are away from home for a large portion of the day, there are feeders set on timers, which would help even out your cat's intake over 12-24 hours.

Feed a weight reduction diet: Weight reduction diets allow you to feed the usual amount of food (unless you are severely overfeeding), but still feed less fat and calories. For example, if your cat is normally fed 3/4 cup of dry food, the recommended amount of diet food will probably also be about 3/4 cup.

Feeding your cat more often during this time will keep hunger under control. Generally feeding 2-4 small meals throughout the day is recommended. Also feed your overweight cat separately from the other pets to prevent him from eating their food. Overweight cats are generally not as agile, so try feeding the overweight cat on the floor and the other cats up higher, e.g.; on a cat 'tree.' (This approach has worked for one of my cats who was becoming overweight.) Feeding your cat before you prepare a meal or eat may also be helpful.

Eliminate table scraps and reduce treats

An overweight cat should not be placed on a severely calorie-restricted diet. Serious and even fatal liver failure can occur.

Table scraps are often high in fats and sugars, and thus in calories. Feeding your cat before you cook or eat may help decrease his begging. If you cannot resist giving treats, choose a treat that is made for cats and is low in fat. Examples include:

- Air-popped popcorn, non-salted and non-buttered
- Broccoli
- Cooked green beans
- Baked or frozen canned diet food (Cut small slices of canned food and bake them at 350°F until crisp. Store in refrigerator. Alternatively, simply freeze slices of the canned food and feed it frozen to your cat.)
- Commercial low calorie cat treats

Treats should never make up more than 10% of the daily intake. New toys are often a good substitute for treats, as is exercise. For cats who like to be groomed, a good brushing can take the place of food treats. If you ask your cat, she will probably say your attention is the best treat she could have.

Exercise

In addition to reducing calorie intake, it is important to increase the calories used. Exercise programs for cats are more difficult to design than those for dogs. Some cats will walk on a leash and this would be excellent exercise. Even just going outside under supervision can get the cat to move around a bit more. Some cats enjoy watching cat 'videos'; it may not be that much exercise, but at least it keeps them alert and prone to bat at the TV at least a few times. Buy the cat some new toys and initiate play with the cat. Try a little catnip. In addition to burning a few extra calories, exercise and play may help keep the cat's focus away from the food bowl.



Supplement with a multi-vitamin and fatty acids

If you are feeding less food, it also means your cat is receiving fewer nutrients. A vitamin/mineral supplement helps guarantee your cat's body has what it needs to stay healthy, alert, and active. Until recently, many of the weight reduction cat foods were deficient in [fatty acids](#), and supplementation was necessary. One of the consequences of decreased fatty acid intake is a dry, flaky hair coat. To keep your pet's skin and coat healthy, it may still be necessary to supplement your pet with a fatty acid supplement such as Derm Caps or Drs. Foster and Smith Vitacaps.

Dietary aids

Various medications and nutraceuticals are being evaluated for use as an adjunct to the more traditional weight reduction program. We are not aware of any ongoing studies on the use of these compounds in cats, however, there may be in the future.

Dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), which has been shown to have antiobesity activity in rodents. A recent study at the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine demonstrated that dogs receiving DHEA while being on a weight reduction program lost weight faster and had lower cholesterol levels than those dogs who were on a weight reduction program alone.

Carnitine is being included in some weight reduction programs because of its effect on the utilization of fat by the body. Studies have suggested that another compound, pyruvate, has favorably altered the metabolism of obese rats and humans and was associated with increased weight loss. Chromium picolinate has been demonstrated to promote the activity of insulin. Its effect on weight loss in obese animals is being studied. The herbal compound *Garcinia cambogia* contains hydroxycitric acid (HCA), which is being investigated as a potential antiobesity agent. Coenzyme Q₁₀, also known as ubiquinone, is essential for energy production at the cellular level. It has been shown to benefit humans with various heart and muscle diseases. Again, studies of its effect on obese animals are currently underway. It has been shown to be safe, with no adverse effects demonstrated in animal studies according to Nutramax, a company which produces Coenzyme Q₁₀ in an oral form for dogs, cats, and horses. Finally, chitin/chitosan, a compound that may inhibit fat absorption and storage is undergoing evaluation as an adjunct to dietary alterations.

Monitor progress

Keep a written log of food intake (including all treats), exercise, and weekly weight. Weigh your cat weekly on the same scale at the same time of day. (Weigh yourself holding the cat, then weigh just yourself and subtract the difference. This may not be highly accurate, so you may want to use the scale at a veterinarian's office or borrow a baby scale.) It is sometimes helpful to plot out this information (dates and weights) on a graph. Remember, you may hit 'plateaus' in which your cat seems stuck at a certain weight. This is common. Do not despair, but continue with the weight reduction program, making sure no one in the household is 'cheating.'

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A good way to help you enjoy your success is to take a 'before' diet picture, several during the weight reduction process, and then one at its conclusion. You will be amazed at the difference.

Make appointments with your veterinarian every 2-4 weeks to make adjustments in the weight control program.

Week

Maintenance

Once the weight is lost, the last thing we want is for the cat to regain it. To be sure that does not happen, continue weighing your cat as you gradually increase food intake. You can either feed more of the weight reduction diet or change to a diet that is less restrictive. Be careful when feeding free choice (the bowl of food is always there); some cats will do fine with this, others may abuse the privilege. If weight is regained consistently for 2 weeks, or more than 3% of weight regained in one week, go back on the diet program. Remember, exercise needs to continue after the weight is lost or pounds will start to accumulate again.

Enjoy the results

When the weight goal is reached, congratulate yourself and your cat. You will be amazed at how much younger and livelier your cat seems to be. Enjoy the longer life you will be able to have with your happier, healthier friend!