

People Think This Shows Love for Their Pet – This Study Proves Otherwise

Owners often (silently) fear their pet will become aggressive and depressed if they don't demonstrate their 'love' for their pet this way. In reality, the opposite was true. This study showed it made their pet more affectionate, cuddly, and demonstrative, and less manipulative.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- One of the reasons owners of overweight cats don't help them lose weight is a fear the pet will stop loving them
- A study suggests the opposite — that cats on diets actually grow more affectionate with their owners, not less
- There are many reasons people overfeed their cats, including equating food with love, and also misreading certain feline behaviors
- To slim down an overweight cat, practice portion control, learn exactly how many calories to feed, feed a biologically appropriate diet, and insure your cat gets exercise
- Indoor cats need daily exercise opportunities through climbing structures, interactive toys that appeal to hunting instincts, and supervised outdoor time

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At some point over the last half-century or so, it became fashionable to do the easy thing rather than the right thing. (Once in a while, the easy thing is also the right thing — but not too often.)

One excellent but tragic illustration of this phenomenon is the epidemic of overweight and obese pets in the U.S. Apparently for many pet parents, overfeeding their animal companions is easier than insuring they stay lean and fit. Offering treats is easier than spending time with them.

One only has to look at wolves and wild cats to understand that nature doesn't create fat canines or felines — humans do. The nature of wild animals is to eat only the amount of food needed to survive, and maintain a well-conditioned body through lots of physical activity.

Sadly, the nature of many pet guardians today is to stuff their dogs and cats full of too much of the wrong kind of food, and offer them few opportunities to be physically active.

An Unspoken Fear of People with Fat Pets?

Since virtually everyone today is aware that carrying too much weight is dangerous, it's always perplexing to see pet parents with fat pets who simply refuse to deal with the problem.

A New York Times article titled "Fat Cats on a Diet: Will They Still Love You?"¹ tells the story of Maya, a 10-year-old cat who weighed a shocking 25 pounds and was having trouble moving around (and it's no wonder, at that weight).

Poor Maya was on a collision course with any number of obesity-related diseases. Maya's veterinarian told her guardians the cat absolutely needed to lose weight — a lot of weight — but they remained reluctant to decrease their kitty's food intake.

The owners worried Maya would become "aggressive and depressed" if they reduced the amount of food she was offered. They also worried she would grow to hate them.

Your Cat Won't Hate You if You Put Him on a Diet, Study Says

In a study titled "Owner's perception of changes in behaviors associated with dieting in fat cats," researchers at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine asserted the following:

*"Owners are often reluctant to impose a weight loss program on their cats because they think the cats will be less affectionate and will beg all the time. They fear that the cat will no longer like them and do not want the cat to exhibit annoying behaviors."*²

The researchers discovered there's no need for cat parents to worry about losing their pet's love if they cut back on their food intake. According to results reported by owners, after 8 weeks on a diet, the cats in the study were actually more affectionate than normal after they were fed. According to the New York Times:

*"... Owners felt that despite the restricted feeding, the cats did not turn vindictive. Instead, owners believed the cats showed more affection. After feeding, the cats would more often purr and sit in the owner's lap."*³

Owners of Overweight Pets Show Love By Offering (Too Much) Food

When a house cat is overweight, it's a sure bet his human is demonstrating love with food. As a result, kitty has learned how to behave to score extra treats and bigger meals.

"A cat learns to manipulate us very well," says Dr. Richard Goldstein of New York's Animal Medical Center, "when she's hungry, she's the most affectionate cat in the world. And people will do anything to keep their cats happy."⁴

In addition, many cat guardians free-feed their pets and keep the bowl topped off. It's a good way to turn a hunter into a grazer, and a fat one at that. "Cats don't self-regulate well," says Dr. Goldstein.

One of the study's lead authors, Dr. Emily Levine, believes cat owners misread their pets' behavior, and unintentionally reinforce it with treats. For example, most people like it when their cat rubs up against them, but instead of returning kitty's affection with attention and petting, they feed her instead.

She quickly learns that rubbing against mom or dad produces snacks. Often if a cat is expecting to be fed and mom isn't cooperating, kitty may take a swat at her. Mom immediately feeds the cat to stop the behavior, and what does kitty learn? Swatting also produces snacks.

"A lot of cats are bored and that's the bigger picture," says Levine. "If the only thing they have to do all day is eat, they will ask for more and more."

Fortunately for Maya the cat, her owner eventually saw the light and put her on a weight loss program. After about a year and a half of dieting, Maya had lost 10 pounds and was within a few pounds of her goal weight.

Even as a senior kitty of 11, Maya has a new lease on life. She's back to chasing toys, playing with the other cat in the household, and she's even able to jump up on the bed again so she can sleep with her humans.

Does Your Cat Need to Slim Down?

1. **Feed portion-controlled meals on a consistent schedule** — Most owners of overweight cats serve their pets an all-day buffet. They put down a bowl of food and kitty is allowed to graze throughout the day. When the food gets low, the bowl is refilled.

The natural instinct of your cat is to eat a small amount of food followed by a fast, followed by another small amount of food and another fasting period. Kitties provided with a constant supply of available food turn into grazers. This is contrary to nature, and grazing cats very often consume too many calories from uncontrolled portion sizes.

Feeding two portion-controlled meals a day, one in the morning and one in the evening at about the same time each day, works well for most cats and also fits easily into the daily schedule for most families.

If you're home during the day, you can feed several small meals instead, since one study shows that cats fed more often are more active. Initially, dividing your cat's daily food portion into four smaller "snacks" is a good way to trick her into not recognizing the portion size and calories are shrinking.

2. **Know exactly how many calories kitty should be eating each day** — In order to know how much food to feed your cat, you must calculate calories. Check with your veterinarian on the proper weight for your kitty.

To figure out how many calories your cat requires per day to achieve her ideal weight, first weigh her. Next, figure your kitty's weight in kilograms by dividing her weight in pounds by 2.2. So for example, if your cat weighs 15 pounds, her weight in kilograms is 15 divided by 2.2, or 6.82 kilograms.

Multiply your cat's weight in kilograms by 30 and then add 70 to that result: $6.82 \text{ kilos} \times 30 = 205 + 70 = 275$. Now multiply that result by 0.8: $275 \times 0.8 = 220$.

Your cat needs 220 calories in a day to maintain her 15-pound weight. If your cat eats less than 220 calories she'll lose weight. If she gets over 220 calories a day, she'll gain weight. If you keep her right at those 220 calories, she'll maintain her current weight.

Let's say your 15-pound cat's ideal weight is 10 pounds. Here's how to calculate how many calories she should be eating:

10 pounds divided by 2.2 = 4.55 kilograms

.55 kilos x 30 = 137

137 + 70 = 207

207 x 0.8 = 166 calories

To get your kitty down to her ideal weight of 10 pounds, you need to feed her about 166 calories in a 24 hour period — not the 220 calories she's been eating. So decreasing her caloric intake slightly over time will allow for slow and healthy weight loss.

If your cat has a lot of weight to lose, it's important you reduce calories slowly over time. As you meet your cat's new weight goal (let's say 12 pounds, down from 14 pounds), you re-adjust her daily calories again until you reach her targeted weight (10 pounds).

3. **Feed a species-appropriate diet** — If your cat is eating kibble, he'll need to be slowly and safely transitioned to the right nutrition for his species. Cats require a balanced, moisture dense, fresh meat diet that you can either make at home from recipes, or purchase from a retailer.

Cats can also get fat eating too much of a fresh food diet, without appropriate exercise. So make sure to calculate appropriate caloric intake for your cat, regardless of what type of food he's eating.

4. **Feed cats separately in multi-cat households** — Some kitties are ravenous eaters, while others are perpetually picky. If you happen to have both types of eaters in your home, it's best to separate everyone at mealtime.

This gives you the ability to precisely control the amount of food each kitty is served, lets you know immediately if someone's appetite drops off or picks up noticeably (both can be signs of illness), and solo dining also allows each cat to eat at his or her own pace without any need to resource-guard.

5. **Get your cat moving on a daily basis** — The good news is that your indoor-only cat is much safer from trauma, disease, and general mischief than indoor/outdoor cats. The not-so-good news is that indoor cats often don't get much exercise, and they also don't get to ground themselves.

Make sure your cat has things to climb on, like a multi-level cat tree or tower. Invest in a laser toy, either a very inexpensive, simple one or something a bit more sophisticated like the Frolicat™ line. When considering other kitty diversions, think like a hunter and choose toys and activities that appeal to your cat's stalking instinct.

Don't overlook old standbys, either, like dragging a piece of string across the floor in view of your cat. Ping-pong balls are another oldie but goodie, along with bits of paper rolled into balls, and pretty much any light object that can be made to move fast and in unanticipated ways.

It's also recommended to walk your cat in nice weather using a harness. This gets him out into the fresh air, stimulates his senses, and gets his paws in direct contact with the ground. An alternative is a safe, fully enclosed porch or patio area that prevents your cat from getting out and other animals from getting in.

Sources and References

^{1,3,4} [The New York Times, February 16, 2016](#)

² [Journal of Veterinary Behavior, Volume 11, January–February 2016, Pages 37–41](#)
