

# 9 Out of 10 Pet Owners Don't Realize This About Their Pet

It's astonishing that owners are in such denial about this, and because of it, they are forcing their pets to suffer from unnecessary painful conditions and disease, as well as early death. And, tragically, all too often it can lead to euthanasia. Are you enabling this to happen to your pet?

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- According to current statistics, 58% of cats in the U.S. are overweight, and 28% are obese
- There are no fat felines in the wild, so the painful truth is that humans are creating an epidemic of obesity and unnecessary suffering in pet cats
- Overweight cats are at greatly increased risk for shortened lifespans, diseases affecting mobility, and numerous disorders involving major organ systems
- There are many things you can do as a cat parent to help your pet achieve and maintain a healthy weight, including feeding the species-appropriate nutrition in the right portions, and encouraging her to be physically active
- Overweight cats should lose weight very slowly, so work with your veterinarian to develop a weight loss plan customized for your pet's individual needs

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Sadly, the majority of pet cats in the U.S. are either overweight or obese. According to research by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP), 58% of American kitties are overweight, and 28% are considered obese.<sup>1</sup>

Even more discouraging is that an astonishing 90% of cat guardians think their too-heavy cat is a normal weight. According to Dr. Ernie Ward, founder of APOP:

*“Pet owners think their obese dog or cat is a normal weight, making confronting obesity difficult. No one wants to think their pet is overweight, and overcoming denial is our first battle.”<sup>2</sup>*

Our animal companions have much shorter lifespans than we do. Depending on her breed and other factors, your kitty's life is compressed into a short 12 to 20 years. And just as her lifespan is accelerated compared to yours, so too is the damage done to her body when she is forced to carry too much weight.

Yes, forced. There are no fat felines in the wild. It is humans who have created this problem, and it is humans alone who have the power to reverse the disastrous trend of an ever-increasing number of fat, sick, immobile, and short-lived pet cats.

## Fat Cats Routinely Become Very Sick Cats

There are so many reasons to prevent your cat from becoming overweight or obese. One of the most important is to insure your kitty has a good quality of life throughout her life. Another is so that you'll have your pet with you for as long as possible.

- Overweight pets often don't live as long as pets at a normal weight. The shortened lifespan of a heavy cat can be the result of one or more obesity-related diseases.
- Carrying around extra weight on a small feline frame places tremendous stress on joints, tendons and ligaments. This can cause arthritis. Tragically, in worst-case scenarios, senior cats immobilized by weight and intractable pain wind up euthanized.
- Overweight cats have fat lurking in places you can't see. For example, accumulations of fat deposits in the chest and abdomen can restrict the ability of your kitty's lungs to expand, making breathing difficult.
- Obesity is the biggest risk factor for diabetes mellitus in cats. Kitties fed processed cat food, in particular dry food (kibble), are at highest risk for developing this often difficult-to-manage disease.
- Overweight kitties can also develop hypertension (high blood pressure), which can negatively impact major organ systems.

Hypertension does significant damage to a cat's body. It causes small blood vessels to leak and in some cases, rupture. The result can be a detached retina or a stroke. High blood pressure also takes a toll on the kidneys and heart.

- Overweight and obese cats are often predisposed to fatty liver disease, a life-threatening disorder also called hepatic lipidosis. A buildup of fat cells in the liver prevents normal functioning. Left untreated, the liver ultimately fails and sadly, cats can and do die from this condition.
- Your overweight kitty is also at greater risk for feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD).

FLUTD is a group of disorders, any of which can affect your cat's bladder or urethra, including cystitis (inflammation of the bladder), urinary tract infections, urinary stones, urethral plugs, cancer and other disorders.

Overweight cats are also at higher risk for surgical complications, decreased immune function, skin disorders, constipation, and certain types of cancer.

## Are You Enabling Your Cat To Be Fat?

Given the tremendous risks associated with allowing cats to become overweight, veterinarians and cat owners alike will hopefully heed the words of Dr. Steve Budsberg, Director of Clinical Research at the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine:

*"The prevention of obesity needs to be at the forefront of all discussions people have about the health of their pet with their veterinarian. The body of evidence that shows the negative impact of obesity on all the body's systems is overwhelming.*

*As an orthopedic surgeon I see, on a daily basis, the effects of obesity on dogs and cats with osteoarthritis. It is very frustrating to see how much pain and discomfort excess weight has on my patients.*

*Veterinarians and owners have the ability to stop obesity in our pets. No animal goes to the refrigerator or the pantry and helps themselves. We enable our pets to get fat!"<sup>3</sup>*

## Nutrition and Exercise Recommendations for Overweight Cats

1. In order to slim down an overweight cat, feed a portion-controlled, balanced, and species-appropriate diet. Most overweight cats are fed a dry diet and are often free-fed, which means they're grazing day and night on food that is keeping them fat.

If your cat is still eating kibble, she'll need to be slowly and safely transitioned to the right nutrition for her species: a low carb, moisture-dense, and fresh food diet. Not only will a better diet help with weight loss, it will make your feline companion much healthier overall.

2. Next, make sure your kitty has at least one thing to climb on in your home, like a multi-level cat tree or tower. If he's willing to use it, he'll get some good stretching, scratching and climbing time in each day even when you're not around.
3. It's important to keep in mind that your cat has a very limited attention span. Consider investing in a laser toy, either a very inexpensive, simple one or something more sophisticated like the FrolicCat. Many kitties will enthusiastically chase the beams or dots from these toys.
4. You'll also want to invest in a few interactive cat toys. To pick the best ones, consider things from your pet's point of view. She's a hunter, so when choosing toys and activities to engage her, think in terms of appealing to her natural instincts to stalk prey.

For example, if you have a cat toy like Da Bird, make it land and take off like the real thing. To keep her interest, every so often have the bird land on a tasty treat and let your cat discover it when she pounces on her prey.

5. Also keep some low-tech interactive toys on hand, like a piece of string you drag across the floor, ping-pong balls, or bits of paper rolled into balls. Any lightweight object that can be made to move fast and in unexpected directions will entice almost any cat to chase after it.

Your cat will tell you when he's had enough, and you shouldn't expect one game with one toy to go on for very long. Cats in the wild stalk prey for only a few minutes at a time and then move on.

6. Turn mealtime into a workout session. Put your kitty's food in a bowl, and then walk around the house with it, with her following close behind. Stop from time to time and offer her small bites of food. As she gets used to this new game, you'll probably notice her being very active as she weaves around your ankles, runs ahead then turns back and runs towards you, stretches up toward the bowl, and hops around on her back legs.

After 10 to 20 minutes and a good little workout for kitty, you can put the bowl on the floor and let her finish up her meal.

## A Word of Caution About Cats and Dieting

It's extremely important that you diet your kitty slowly. Weigh your cat every week until he reaches his ideal body weight. Once that's accomplished, you can weigh him every four to six months to insure he stays at his new healthy weight.

If your cat is obese, he should lose no more than a half-pound per month to prevent triggering a deadly case of hepatic lipidosis. As your cat's body senses weight being lost, it will begin to mobilize accumulated stores of fat. If weight loss occurs too quickly, the rush of fats being mobilized can overwhelm the liver and shut it down. Very overweight kitties are more prone to this life-threatening condition because their percentage of body fat is so high.

If your cat is only mildly overweight, he can probably safely lose up to a pound a month. What's important is that his weight goes down and not up, but progress should be slow and steady. There's no such thing as too slowly when it comes to weight loss in cats.

These weight loss timing guidelines are only suggestions. Some kitties should lose weight much slower than outlined here due to existing medical issues like diabetes and other chronic conditions. You should work with your veterinarian to determine a safe and healthy amount of weight loss for your cat, and the rate at which weight loss should occur.

It's also very important that you not change your cat's food while he's dieting. If your cat rejects his food and won't eat (which cats sometimes do when new food is introduced), it can cause a whole host of metabolic problems. This is especially true with overweight kitties.

## Sources and References

[VetStreet](#)

<sup>1, 2</sup> [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention \(Archived\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, APOP Survey 2011 \(Archived\)](#).

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