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OBESITY

Is feline obesity a problem?

YES - obesity, defined as an excess of body weight of 20% or more, is the most common nutritional disease of domestic cats. Although the frequency varies from one country to the next, we know in some countries that up to 40% of adult cats are obese! Despite these alarming figures, very little is known about the detrimental effects of obesity on feline health. What we do know is that cats that are neutered and live indoors are more likely to be obese. Similarly, male cats are more likely to be obese. With respect to the detrimental effects on feline health, obesity in the cat is a known risk factor for both diabetes mellitus, lower urinary tract disease and arthritis. In humans, obesity causes an increase in morbidity and mortality at all ages and is associated with diabetes mellitus, certain types of cancer, impaired mobility and arthritis, high blood pressure, heart disease, and other illnesses. Recent studies suggest that heart disease might also occur in obese cats! More work is needed to evaluate this and to determine what other detrimental effects obesity has on cats.

Finally, obesity in cats is associated with hepatic lipidosis. This is a severe form of liver failure in cats. It typically occurs in cats which are obese and have then undergone a brief period of 'stress' which causes anorexia. The 'stress' may be as simple as a change of house or a change in diet. Hepatic lipidosis used to be an almost universally fatal disease in cats. Fortunately, with improved, aggressive and prolonged therapy about 80% of affected cats can be saved. However, it is because of the risk for this potentially fatal disease that treatment of feline obesity needs to be done cautiously and always under the care of a veterinary surgeon.

What specifically causes obesity in cats and how should it be treated?

Many factors work together to cause obesity in cats, and as mentioned earlier not all of them are clearly understood. Some are probably genetic, while others are clearly related to diet and environment. Also, as mentioned above, neutering increases the risk for obesity in cats. It is important for the cat owner and veterinary surgeon to keep all these factors in mind when treating the obese individual. Prevention is better than treatment but not always easy. When cats are neutered. Their food needs are decreased, apparently because metabolism becomes 'more efficient'. Also, cats living indoors are more prone to obesity, perhaps because they eat more out of boredom, but also because they have less opportunity to stay trim through exercise. Remember, everybody should run and play, including cats!

Once a cat becomes obese, the challenge for owner and vet is to promote weight loss safely and then to maintain the optimum weight. In the long run it is better to set realistic goals for weight reduction rather than attempting to force the cat down to a “normal” weight. Usually a 15-20% reduction in weight is a good target that can easily be achieved! Rapid weight loss should be avoided, since it puts the cat at risk for development of severe liver disease, discussed above. And weight that is lost slowly is more likely to stay lost! There are no drugs or magic pills which can be used safely or effectively. Commercial “low-calorie” diets are available from veterinary surgeons and provide the basis for effective weight loss. However, they are more effective when combined with additional exercise. This also has the advantage of providing more time for interaction between the cat and the human, which we know provides enjoyment and is beneficial for the health of both. With some patience and extra care obese cats can be treated safely and effectively, with the ultimate goal of prolonging a healthy happy life!

A cheaper alternative to commercial low calorie diet is a 33% to 50% reduction in food intake. This should be accompanied by regular weighing of the cat. If the cat fails to lose weight, then the amount of food should be again reduced by 33-50%. If weigh-ins are every 1-2 weeks, the cat is invariably safely losing weight within a month. **In cats with access to outdoors it is vital to ensure that the cat does not have access to alternative food sources such as friendly neighbours!**