



Verzijlenberg Veterinary Hospital

4 John St, Box 1159
Sundridge, ON POA 1Z0
705-384-0400

Obesity in Cats

Joseph W. Bartges, DVM, PhD, DACVIM (Small Animal), DACVN

BASIC INFORMATION

Description

Obesity is defined as body weight in excess of 15% above normal resulting from the accumulation of fat. It occurs in 25-50% of cats in the United States. Associated health risks include fatty liver syndrome, diabetes mellitus, musculoskeletal and cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, high fat levels in the blood, possible anesthetic and surgical complications, decreased heat tolerance and stamina, and reproductive problems.

Causes

Obesity occurs when energy intake exceeds energy expenditure and other risk factors are present, such as neutering and dietary factors. Feeding calorically dense, highly palatable, high-fat diets and free-choice feeding increase the risk of obesity.

Clinical Signs

Affected cats have excessive fat accumulation around their neck, over the tail-head, along the underside, and in the abdominal cavity. Difficulty moving or breathing, exercise intolerance, urinary or fecal incontinence, unkempt appearance, and pressure sores may occur.

Diagnostic Tests

Cats are usually tested for liver disease and diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes). Other tests may be recommended to assess for obesity-related diseases in other organs.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

Weight reduction programs involve a multistep approach that includes good owner commitment, a feeding plan, and an exercise plan. In order for the animal to lose weight, it is necessary for energy expenditure to be greater than energy intake. This is accomplished by increasing exercise and by feeding a diet that is lower in fat and higher in fiber.

Nutrients in diets formulated for weight loss in cats are designed to decrease energy intake, so that weight loss occurs without inducing other nutrient deficiencies. In order to achieve weight loss, a diet is fed that meets resting energy requirements of the cat at its ideal weight. Weight loss is better achieved with meal feeding rather than free-choice feeding. It is also important to limit treats and not to allow access to other pets' food or to human food.

Alternatively, diets that are higher in fat and protein and lower in carbohydrates compared with adult maintenance foods can be fed. When feeding this type of diet, food intake must also be decreased. A low-fat, high-fiber diet can be started, and if weight loss is not achieved, the alternative diet can be tried.

Getting a cat to exercise can be difficult. It helps to place meals in locations that force the cat to climb up or down or to jump. Some cats will chase toys or lights, and feeders are available that force the cat to play with them in order to reach the food.

Getting a cat to lose weight in a multicat household where other cats are not obese is even more difficult. Feed the obese cat separately from the nonobese cats. The nonobese cats' food can be placed in a large box with a narrow opening that is too small to allow the obese cat to enter. Radiocontrolled devices can be used that allow the nonobese cats (who wear special collars) entry into areas through a gate that has a radio receiver. Pick up leftover food so that the obese cat does not eat the other cats' food.

Follow-up Care

Body weight is monitored every 2 weeks during weight loss, and the diet and exercise are adjusted to achieve a loss of 1-2% of body weight per week. Many cats lose weight in a stairstep fashion: They lose quite a bit over the first 2 weeks, do not lose much over the next 2 weeks, and then lose quite a bit again. Alterations in diet are not usually made unless weight has remained unchanged at two sequential examinations. Laboratory tests are done periodically. If the cat also has diabetes, fructosamine and glucose tests may be recommended. Insulin dosage may need to be decreased or discontinued over time as weight loss occurs.

When the desired target weight is reached, body weight is monitored monthly to ensure the ideal weight is maintained. The maintenance diet is usually an adult diet designed to maintain the lower weight. These diets are typically higher in fiber and lower in fat than most over-the-counter, adult maintenance diets. Certain diets labeled as *light* may be used, but they are not as effective. The alternative weight-loss diet (high fat and protein, low carbohydrate) can also be continued. Treats, snacks, and table scraps should comprise less than 5% of total caloric intake.

Prognosis

Weight loss is more difficult to achieve in obese cats than in obese dogs. Working with a veterinarian is important because of the many obesity-related diseases that occur in cats. Prevention of obesity in growing cats is also very important.