

The Condition Sweeping Across the US Affecting 61% of Cats

It's truly become an epidemic, and like some rogue disease, it can reduce your cat's quality of life and lifespan. Plus, it can be a catalyst for a wide range of degenerative diseases. Here's how to tell if your cat may be affected, and five things you can start doing today to treat it.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- As of 2022, 61% of cats in the U.S. were overweight or obese, and therefore candidates for a wide range of degenerative diseases that can negatively impact both quality of life and lifespan
- Because so many cats are too heavy nowadays, many cat parents can't tell the difference between a kitty who is overweight and one who is a normal weight
- To help your cat lose weight, feed a nutritionally complete, fresh, meat-based diet, calculate daily calories yourself, don't free-feed, offer limited treats, and encourage daily physical exercise
- It's very important that cats lose weight very gradually to maintain their overall health

An estimated 61% of cats in the U.S. are overweight or obese,¹ and since excessively fluffy felines are now in the majority, many pet parents have lost the plot and can no longer tell the difference between a too-heavy kitty and one of a normal size.

How to Recognize an Overweight or Obese Cat

If you're unsure about your own cat, stand over her and look down at her. Does she have a tapered in waist? If not — if she's shaped more like an oval, she's probably overweight. You should also be able to feel (but not see) her ribs as well as the bones near the base of her tail. If she's obese, you should be able to easily see excess fat on her abdomen, hips and neck.

You can also compare her to this body condition chart provided by the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA):

with a goal of less than 10% for healthy cats.

My first recommendation is a nutritionally balanced **homemade fresh food diet** of lean meats, healthy fats, plus fibrous vegetables as the only sources of carbohydrates. These "healthy" carbs are the perfect way to maintain your cat's microbiome, while providing fiber, antioxidants and phytonutrients.

It's important to avoid feeding your favorite feline a starch-heavy, carbohydrate-laden ultra-processed diet (kibble). Processed pet foods are a significant contributor to the cat obesity epidemic in the U.S. Many pet parents overfeed, but very often the problem is also the quality of food in addition to the quantity. If you're feeding a dry diet, while it might be free of grains, it can't be free of carbs, because carbs are necessary to form kibble. If you look at the package label, you'll see potato, sweet potato, lentils, peas (pea starch), chickpeas, tapioca and/or other carbohydrate sources. Starch breaks down into sugar, even though you don't see sugar on the pet food package label.

Many dry cat foods are loaded with carbs (40% to 50% of total content in some cases), which can lead to blood sugar fluctuations, insulin resistance, obesity, **diabetes** and other health problems in cats. Carb intake above the daily needs of your kitty (less than 10%) activates internal enzyme factors that go to work storing the excess as body fat.

Calculate the carbs in your kitty's diet by adding up the moisture, fat, protein and ash (estimate 6% if you don't see this value listed) on the pet food label and subtract this value from 100: this is the amount of carbs in your cat's diet.

#2 — Calculate Calories

Most people who feed commercially available pet food tend to follow the suggested feeding guidelines printed on the package, which often isn't the best approach. These recommendations typically use overly broad weight ranges such as "under 20 pounds" when clearly, a 5-pound kitty requires significantly less calories than a 15-pound cat.

Package feeding instructions also use wide serving ranges, such as "feed ½ to 1 ½ cups." These suggestions obviously can't take into account, for example, an animal's activity level, and they tend to be short on other important details, such as whether "feed ½ to 1 ½ cups" is a daily or per-meal guideline.

Instead, feed your overweight cat to achieve weight loss. Decide (with the help of your veterinarian, if necessary) what his ideal weight should be. Then use the following formula to calculate the precise number of calories to feed daily to get him down to his ideal weight and maintain it.

Let's say your cat's ideal weight is a slender 12 pounds rather than her current weight of 16 pounds:

$$\text{Daily calories (feline)} = \text{Body Weight (kg)} \times 30 + 70 \times 0.8$$

Her ideal weight of 12 pounds divided by 2.2 converts to 5.5 kilograms; now the formula looks like this:

$$\text{Daily calories} = 5.5 \text{ (kg)} \times 30 + 70 \times 0.8$$

And finally, it looks like this:

#5 — Inspire the Natural Athlete in Your Cat

You'll never see a fat cat in the wild because they follow their natural instincts, which include the drive to be physically active and chase prey. I use tiny pieces of meat as treats to lure my cat up and down stairs for aerobic activity.

Consistent daily exercise, including at least 20 minutes of aerobic activity, will help your chunky kitty burn fat and increase muscle tone. For some great ideas to get the ball rolling, check out [**Creative Strategies to Get Your Indoor Cat Moving**](#). Engaging in play is also a great way to distract cats from "crying in the kitchen," the yowling that sometimes occurs when they realize they're eating fewer calories. Getting their bodies moving and their mind off food is important.

Remember: Cats Must Lose Weight Slowly and Safely

It's extremely important that you diet your cat slowly. I recommend weighing her every week until she reaches her ideal body weight. Once that's accomplished, you can weigh her every four to six months to ensure that she's staying at her new healthy weight. And keep in mind that weight gain in cats happens in 1- and 2-ounce increments over time, so you must stay very firm on holding her at her ideal body weight.

If your cat is obese, she'll need to lose no more than ½ pound a month, because overweight kitties are prone to a very serious condition called [**hepatic lipidosis**](#), or fatty liver disease. This condition never happens in nature, because animals in the wild never become obese. Captivity has created some really strange metabolic diseases in animals, and fatty liver disease in felines is one of them.

As an obese cat's body senses weight being lost, it begins to mobilize accumulated stores of fat very rapidly. If weight loss occurs too quickly in an obese cat, the flood of fat can overwhelm the liver and shut it down. Very overweight cats are more prone to this life-threatening condition because their percentage of body fat is so high. If your cat is only mildly overweight, she can probably safely lose up to 1 pound a month.

What's important is that your cat's weight goes down and not up. But her weight loss should progress very slowly and steadily over time. You should see measurable weight loss every month, but some kitties should lose weight much more slowly than I've outlined here, due to existing medical issues, like diabetes or other chronic conditions.

Be sure to work with your veterinarian to determine a safe, healthy amount of weight loss for your individual cat, and the rate at which the weight loss should occur. It's also very important not to change your cat's food while she's dieting. If she rejects a new food and won't eat, it can trigger a whole host of metabolic problems, including fatty liver disease.

If you're looking to transition to healthy food without stressing your cat out, check out [**this video**](#) I filmed with my mother about getting cats off kibble safely.

New research shows cats are sensitive to subtle changes in their caloric intake, so spreading kitty's calculated calories over a 10-hour eating window is a smart way to prevent a stress response while helping her become healthier.

Sources and References

[NPR September 21, 2019](#)

¹ [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention](#)