

Here's What a Healthy Cat's Ideal Weight Should Be

Pet obesity has reached epidemic levels in the US, with cats only somewhat worse off than dogs; overweight kitties are at risk for many serious diseases, along with a compromised quality of life and shortened lifespan.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Pet obesity has reached epidemic levels in the U.S., with cats only somewhat worse off than dogs; overweight kitties are at risk for many serious diseases, along with a compromised quality of life and shortened lifespan
- While the ideal weight of the average healthy cat is 8 to 12 pounds, it's important to gauge your own pet's weight based on body frame size and lean muscle mass, using the feline body condition chart as a reference
- Most mainstream feline obesity studies and weight loss advice revolve around the use of dry diets; however, veterinary experts in feline nutrition agree kibble is biologically inappropriate food for cats at any weight
- Moisture-rich diets help kitties lose weight naturally; my recommendation is a moisture-rich homemade fresh food diet of lean meats, healthy fats, and a few fibrous vegetables
- Healthy weight loss involves meeting your cat's unique nutritional requirements through a balanced diet while practicing portion control; this approach will cause your pet's body to burn fat stores

Tragically, according to the most recent Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP) survey, a whopping 61% of cats in the U.S. are overweight or obese.¹ That was as of 2022, and if the 15-year trend holds, the news in 2023 will be even more dismal.

I'm not exaggerating when I call this situation a tragedy. Excess weight is both its own disease and the trigger for many other life-altering disorders such as diabetes, **kidney disease**, hypertension, hypothyroidism, and arthritis. And if all that wasn't enough, carrying too much weight around can also significantly reduce the quantity and quality of your furry family member's life.

What Does a Healthy Cat at an Ideal Weight Look Like?

Generally speaking, the ideal weight for the average healthy cat is 8-12 pounds.² Of course, felines come in a variety of sizes, so it's important to evaluate your cat's body frame size and lean muscle mass to determine a healthy weight. This is where the body condition score chart comes in. The chart uses a 9-point scale, with 9 being obese and 1 being emaciated. The ideal for a healthy kitty is the 4-5 range.


 WSAVA
 Global Nutrition
 Committee

Updated on August 13, 2020

Body Condition Score




UNDER IDEAL

- 1 Ribs very easily seen on short-haired cats. No fat pads present. Severe abdominal tuck. Lumbar vertebrae and pelvic bones easily seen and felt.
- 2 Ribs easily seen on short-haired cats. Lumbar vertebrae obvious. Pronounced abdominal tuck. No fat pads present.
- 3 Ribs easily felt with minimal fat covering. Lumbar vertebrae obvious. Obvious waist behind ribs. Minimal abdominal fat pads.
- 4 Ribs felt with minimal fat covering. Noticeable waist behind ribs. Slight abdominal tuck. Minimal abdominal fat pads.

IDEAL

- 5 Well-proportioned. Ribs felt with slight fat covering. Waist seen behind ribs, but not pronounced. Abdominal fat pad minimal.

OVER IDEAL

- 6 Ribs felt with slight excess fat covering. Waist and abdominal fat pad present but not obvious. Abdominal tuck absent.
- 7 Ribs not easily felt through moderate fat covering. Waist not easily seen. Slight rounding of abdomen may be present. Moderate abdominal fat pad.
- 8 Ribs not felt due to excess fat covering. Waist absent. Obvious rounding of abdomen with prominent abdominal fat pad. Fat deposits present over lower back area.
- 9 Ribs not felt under heavy fat cover. Heavy fat deposits over lumbar area, face and limbs. Distention of abdomen with no waist. Abdominal fat deposits.

*A body condition score of 6/9 may be acceptable in some cats, especially older cats.

Bjornvad CR, et al. Evaluation of a nine-point body condition scoring system in physically inactive pet cats. *Anim* 2011;72:423-437.
 Luffness DP. Development and validation of a body condition score system for cats: A clinical tool. *Feline Pract* 1997;25:13-18.
 Teng KY et al. Strong associations of 9-point body condition scoring with survival and lifespan in cats. *J Feline Med Surg* 2016;20(12):1110-1116. DOI: 10.1177/1098124116652188
 ©2020 All rights reserved.


 wsava.org

To determine your own cat's score requires a physical and visual evaluation. When you run your hands over her rib cage, you should be able to feel her ribs without searching through a layer of fat. If she has a very fluffy coat, it can be challenging to visually evaluate her body, but try standing above her looking down. From this angle, her body should have a slight hourglass shape, with a bit of a tuck in the abdomen.

When you look at her from the side, you should see a very slight tuck behind the rib cage and a minimal amount of fat over the abdomen. If you're having trouble determining her body condition score, ask your veterinarian for assistance.

You must also factor in your cat's breed/breed mix, age, and life stage when determining his ideal weight. Healthy petite breeds like the Cornish Rex can weigh less than 8 pounds, while breeds like the **Maine Coon** can tip the scales at over 20 pounds.

Kittens gain weight quickly, as they grow, which is normal and healthy. Adult cats at a healthy size who begin gaining weight, for example, after being spayed or neutered, or because they're grazing on kibble all day and not exercising, will need help getting back on track.

The Problem With Feline Obesity Studies

Sadly, if your cat has a weight problem, the typical advice you'll receive will involve not what she's eating, but how much. Obviously, portion control is essential, but food quality should be the first consideration. Instead, it's almost never mentioned. Research into feline obesity (which is scarce), is often conducted by big pet food manufacturers looking to develop new brands and marketing campaigns.

University research tends to bolster big pet food efforts by producing studies that avoid looking at the quality of cat food, for example, this one: "Effects of overfeeding on the digestive efficiency, voluntary physical activity levels, and fecal characteristics and microbiota of adult cats,"³ and this one: "Effects of weight loss and feeding specially

formulated diets on the body composition, blood metabolite profiles, voluntary physical activity, and fecal metabolites and microbiota of overweight cats.”⁴

In both studies, the cats were fed (and allowed to overeat) a “standard dry cat food diet,” with predictable results as described in this **plain language summary**.

Fat Felines and the ‘Standard Dry Cat Food Diet’

One of the many problems with dry cat food or worse, kibble designed for cats with a weight problem, is they’re loaded with fiber. The theory behind fiber-filled diets is that they make pets feel full. The problem, however, is your cat isn’t being “filled up” at the cellular level where it really counts.

In a 2012 study,⁵ researchers showed that fiber blocks absorption of crucial nutrients into the small intestine. It acts as a barrier, preventing trace minerals, vitamins, and antioxidants from being absorbed into the body.

Chronic deprivation of nutrients to the cells can result in feelings of constant hunger. This is because your carnivorous kitty isn’t getting enough protein to adequately sustain her biology. The constant hunger prompts many pet parents to feed more food. The end result is a pet that is still fat (and often fatter), but at the same time undernourished.

Next to water, protein is the most important nutrient for your cat. Every cell of her body requires protein and when she doesn’t get enough of this essential nutrient, a host of negative side effects can occur.

Cats don’t have a carbohydrate requirement, but because they can digest refined carbs and because carbs are much cheaper than meat, they constitute the bulk of cat food ingredients. The majority of **carbs in a cat’s diet** end up stored as fat. Given the ingredients in dry cat food, it’s easy to see from a physiological standpoint how cats fed kibble become overweight in the first place.

Another problem with kibble — all kibble — is lack of moisture, which is extremely detrimental for felines. Cats don’t have an efficient thirst drive like dogs and other animals. Their bodies are designed to get most of the water they require from their diets, and kibble can’t handle the job.

If your cat isn’t getting sufficient moisture from her food, she’s going without. You won’t find her at her water bowl lapping up huge quantities of the wet stuff to compensate for lack of moisture in her diet. This puts her in a state of constant, chronic low-grade dehydration, which over time can contribute to major organ failure.

Moisture-Rich Diets Help Cats Lose Weight Naturally

A 2011 University of California-Davis study found that cats eat less, lose weight, and maintain healthy body composition when fed moisture-rich diets.⁶ The researchers concluded that canned (wet) diets result in cats voluntarily eating less and a corresponding reduction in body weight.

Further, nutritional content and digestibility were not compromised, which as I mentioned is a big concern with dry cat food formulas. In addition, six cats involved in a concurrent palatability study “greatly preferred” the canned diets to kibble.

These study results make perfect sense because cats in the wild don't have problems with overweight or obesity. They hunt and eat their natural prey, which contains nutrients vital to their survival, including a high percentage of water.

It stands to reason that when the kitties in the UC-Davis study were fed food closer in digestibility and nutrient content to a species-specific diet, they needed fewer calories to feel full. They lost weight naturally without compromising healthy body composition.

The Best Way to Slim Down an Overweight Cat

Pet foods high in carbohydrates — typically kibble — are the biggest cause of obesity in both cats and dogs. Your kitty needs food high in animal protein and moisture, with low to no grain content.

A meat-based, **nutritionally balanced, high-quality fresh food diet** is the best choice for pets who need to lose weight. It's important to adequately nourish your cat's body as weight loss occurs, making sure his requirements for key amino acids, essential fatty acids, and other nutrients are met.

The key to healthy weight loss is to meet your cat's unique nutritional requirements through a balanced diet but feed less food (portion control), which forces his body to burn fat stores.

My recommendation is to follow a moisture-rich homemade fresh food diet recipe, comprised of lean meats, healthy fats, and a few fibrous vegetables as the only source of carbohydrates. Also be sure to calculate kcal (kilocalorie) requirements for your cat's ideal weight, measure his food portions using a measuring cup, and drastically limit treats (be sure to include treats in his total daily calorie count).

I recommend setting aside a small portion of homemade food that can be rolled into tiny pea-sized bites and used as treats throughout the day. Or switch to 100% all-meat treats and use pea-sized portions.

In the beginning days of a gradual transition to his new normal way of eating a better diet in smaller quantities, it's almost a sure bet your cat will try to convince you to feed him more of what he wants. This is the time for tough love, so distract him with playtime, petting, brushing, or a walk outdoors if he's willing.

Given enough time and patience, most kitties can successfully make the change to a healthier diet and smaller portions. However, since it's dangerous for felines to go without eating, it's important to ensure your cat doesn't simply refuse to eat as a reaction to a new or different diet.

This is especially true for overweight cats, because they can quickly develop a life-threatening condition called **hepatic lipidosis** triggered by a sudden loss of appetite or a sudden cutback in caloric intake.

As long as the transition to a better quality, reduced intake diet is very gradual and he's eating enough, stay the course. You won't be sorry!

Sources and References

¹ [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, 2022 U.S. State of Pet Obesity Report](#)

² [PetMD, February 9, 2023](#)

³ [Opetz, D.L. et al. Journal of Animal Science, Volume 101, 2023](#)

⁴ [Opetz, D.L. et al. J Anim Sci. 2023 Jan 3:101](#)

⁵ [Fischer, M.M. et al. Journal of Animal Science. 2012 Jul;90\(7\):2233-45](#)

⁶ [American Journal of Veterinary Research, July 2011, Vol. 72, No. 7, Pages 918-923](#)
