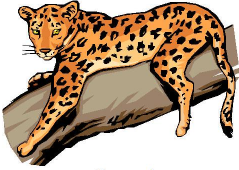


# SAFE WEIGHT LOSS FOR YOUR CAT

## How much do I feed and how often?

Cats prefer multiple small meals per day and they are designed, as small predators, to eat this way. (If your cat was still wild he would hunt and eat several mice, lizards, crickets, or other small prey daily instead of one big meal such as a deer, like a big predator would!) Many people have gotten into the habit of leaving dry food out all of the time. This means that the cat can very easily eat more than he or she needs, often just out of boredom. So the first thing to do is to teach the cat to meal feed. This will take about 3 weeks, depending on your cat.



- All cats in the house should be fed separately from their own bowl (one for dry and one for canned if appropriate)
- Any cat that tries to eat out of another's bowl should be fed in a separate room with the door closed or someone needs to stand there and guard bowls! If there is a very shy eater in the house, he or she may need to be fed in a secluded area also. You will need to adjust this to fit your cats' personalities and the way your house is set up.
- Feed three or four times daily. Most people who work outside the home stick with three times: breakfast, when you get home from work, and once more before bed. Stick as close as possible to the same time on weekends.
- In the first week, put down your cat's regular food, a full bowl, unmeasured, both dry (and canned if appropriate) for about an hour at each chosen meal time.
- During the second week, begin to shorten the time the food is available. Reduce the time to 20-30 minutes, but still do not measure or limit amounts.
- At the beginning of the third week take a day or two to actually measure how much food your dieting cat actually eats in a day. This starting amount is what he "thinks" he needs.
- Now you can reduce the dry food by 25 %. So, as an example, if you figured out that your cat "wants" to eat 1 cup of dry food daily, then his diet amount is  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup daily, divided over 3 or 4 meals daily. Leave any canned food the same for now.
- After 1-2 weeks on the new diet amount, you need to have your cat weighed.



## What food should I feed?



Cats are not like people, or dogs in how their body responds to carbohydrates, proteins and fats. One difference is that they do not need nearly as many carbohydrates as dogs and people do in their basic diet. Another is that the signal for insulin release is different. After a meal the signal for the cat is the amino acid (from protein), whereas in the dog and in people it's the carbohydrate. Because of this difference there are many different diet foods available. Some are low fat and high in fiber, some are just lower in calories overall and some are high in protein and low in carbohydrates. Which food helps which cat feel more satisfied and lose weight more easily varies with the individual cat. Usually if one food is not helping with weight loss or leaves your cat feeling unsatisfied a switch to a different type is recommended.

## Canned or dry?



Canned or moist foods have fewer calories in them as the same amount of dry food. In general canned foods have a lot of water in them, 70-90% water, whereas dry food is only 5-10 % water. Therefore, a mouthful of canned food is lower in calories than is a mouthful of dry food because some of that volume is water. Most cats will lose weight more comfortably on a diet using primarily canned food because they can eat a bit more in *volume*, not ingest as many calories and still feel full. Some cats will not eat canned food, and some cats might get digestive upsets with canned food, so this recommendation does not work for all cats. This makes it important for you to introduce any new foods carefully, watching for a lack of appetite and to increase amounts of the new food slowly so the digestive tract can adjust.

## So, should I change the diet?

A food change is not usually recommended as the *first* step in the diet as there are several new things that you and your cat have to get used to first. After getting your cat comfortable with meal feeding and once the measuring of his or her food has started in earnest, it may be time to consider a food change. Sometimes this is recommended because the cat is just not losing weight. Sometimes it is because your cat is very unsatisfied with his diet and seems to be hungry ALL of the time. Your veterinarian will make the recommendations at this point. It usually involves switching the cat to a mostly canned food diet and may also involve a prescription diet.

Any change in diet needs to be made very slowly to avoid digestive upset...

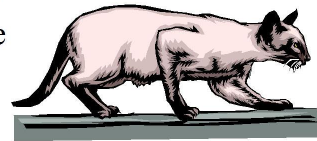
## Treats



If your cat gets 1-3 commercial treats per day, you can probably just stick with that, and most of the calories will be subtracted from the regular dry food allowance. If he or she is used to more than that or a lot of people food snacking is going on you will want to discuss the amounts with your veterinarian on how much to reduce those things. A calorie is a calorie even if it is just a teaspoon of tuna!

## Carnitine

Carnitine is an amino acid that is often recommended as a supplement for cats that are dieting, especially the very overweight cats. It helps the liver process fat better and some studies have shown that cats have better weight loss with this added. It is given as a pill or capsule. But, some cats will take this crushed and mixed into their canned food. If you try this, keep in mind that you can't use this method if your cat doesn't eat the food with the carnitine added. Your veterinarian will let you know if carnitine is appropriate for your cat.



## Weight checks

A safe rate of weight loss is very important for the cat. They are very prone to developing hepatic lipidosis or fatty liver syndrome if they lose weight too fast, especially, if they are already overweight. This is one of the reasons that we recommend *slowly* introducing new foods, *slowly* get them used to meal feeding and then *slowly* begin to cut back on their calories! A safe rate of weight loss is 1-2 ounces per week for most cats, but follow your veterinarian's advice. Of course, this means that you have to weigh your cat every few weeks to see if the food amount needs to be adjusted up or down. You can weigh in at the clinic or purchase a digital scale (one that will weigh your cat in ounces) and check your cat's weight at home. If you weigh at home, please be sure to call the weights into the clinic on a regular basis so recommendations can be made. At some point, your veterinarian will recommend an exam to determine if your cat has reached his or her goal weight. It may also be recommended that blood work be checked to make sure the liver is doing well with the diet. This is particularly important in seriously overweight cats.



## What about exercise?

This is just as important for the health of your cat as it is for you. Most cats do not get anywhere near the amount of exercise or mental stimulation that they would get if they were still wild animals. This contributes to weight gain by decreasing their metabolism and in some cats causes boredom eating. We, as owners, are at fault when we offer food treats to stop the pestering and meowing, when what the cat really wanted was something interesting to do! There are three steps to increasing your cat's activity level and enhancing his or her life.



1. **Schedule playtime daily.** Give your cat something to look forward to besides just eating and petting. Plan 10 minutes each morning and evening, 15 minutes each night or in the middle of the afternoon, whatever works for your schedule. Get out the laser pointer, use a feather toy, a shoe string, throw paper wads or ping pong balls down the hall and get your cat to play a little. Once he or she realizes that this activity has a schedule you will find your cat waiting eagerly for it at the same time each day.
2. **Rotate toys weekly.** The same toys out all of the time are boring. It's not like being outside, where all of the sights and smells to investigate change daily. This week, leave out a paper bag and some fur mice. Next week, put those away and bring out the cardboard box and ping pong balls, the third week try his catnip mouse and some tissue paper to crinkle up. Use your imagination here and keep rotating things in and out of the toy area. Since the toys are "new" each week, your cat will spend a little more time investigating, a little more time awake and burning calories.
3. **Teach your cat to hunt.** In most cases the dieting cat eats his meal in just a couple of minutes. That can certainly leave them unsatisfied. You might try taking some of his treats or some of his dry food allowance and put it in and around his toys; a few kibbles in the cardboard box, under the tissue paper, inside of an empty cardboard paper towel roll. They sell balls with holes in them that can be filled with kibble and only rolling it along the floor will release the food. You could give him half of his food allowance in one room and half in another. You could feed your cat one kibble at a time by making him chasing it down the hallway as you toss it. All these ideas take the focus off the food for your cat and turn it into a fun game that also increases his activity level. You might choose to do this every day with one meal, or several times per week as it fits your schedule. With multiple cats or dogs in the house, you may choose to do these things in one room with the door closed so the dieter has time to find all of his food.



It's also important to retrain your cat if he or she constantly begs or pesters you for food. If your kitty starts begging for food but it's not one of his meal or treat times, distract him with something he likes; a few strokes with his brush, bringing out the laser pointer, throwing a toy down the hallway, petting him. Do anything *except* offer food. You would like your cat to learn that bothering you for food only works at the specific times you have chosen.