

# Ask the Vet



## Jennifer Mercier, DVM

Raised on a lake in Maine, Dr. Mercier was a competitive gymnast before earning her veterinary degree from N. C. State College of Veterinary Medicine. She has worked with a variety of species, from cats and dogs to zebras and rhinos, before joining The Cat Clinic in 2010. She finds all aspects of veterinary medicine to be challenging and rewarding, but particularly enjoys helping owners understand how to best care for their fuzzy friends. In her off time, Dr. Mercier enjoys cycling, yoga, and hiking.

## FELINE OBESITY

**Help! My veterinarian just told me my cat is overweight -- or even obese!**

**Q** Why does it matter if my cat is overweight?

Obesity is now the leading nutritional disorder in domestic cats. If your cat is overweight or obese, he or she is at serious risk of developing all sorts of problems, including diabetes, heart disease, liver disease, arthritis, and a lot more. So here are some hints on how to help your cat lose weight to optimize his or her health.

**Q** How can you get a cat to lose weight?

The first thing to do is figure out, with the help of your veterinarian, what your cat's ideal body weight should be. The best way to evaluate a cat's weight is assessing the body condition. Feel the rib cage. You should be able to feel the ribs, but there should be a healthy layer of padding over them. Then, look at the waistline. You should see an hourglass shape, or a small indentation at the waist behind the rib cage. Next, feel the spine and hip bones. You should be able to feel the very tips of the spine on top with a healthy rounded padding on either side and over the hip bones. Finally, don't worry about that small fat pad on the underside of the belly. That's a sign your kitty is healthy!

**Q** What kind of food should I feed my cat for weight loss?

Sometimes a special diet isn't necessary, but if your cat needs to lose more than a pound, consider switching to a food that's specifically "light" or "reduced calorie". Some prescription weight loss foods have different percentages of protein and carbohydrates. Higher levels of quality protein may be the best thing to help your cat lose weight, but still maintain lean muscle mass. Another strategy may be switching to a high quality canned food to help reduce the amount of carbohydrates in the diet. Your veterinarian can help you decide what type of food is best and develop a weight loss plan tailored for your kitty.


**Q** How much food should I feed my cat?

For a kitty that only needs to shed a few ounces, simply decreasing the daily amount of food may be sufficient. Knowing your cat's ideal body weight, you can determine how many calories your cat should eat in a day to reach and stay at that perfect, healthy weight. Ideally, you should feed your kitty a measured amount of food, rather than keeping the bowl full at all times. If your kitty is a grazer, put out a measured amount daily and let her eat throughout the day. For the average sized cat, about 1/2 to 2/3 cup of dry food per day is plenty! This will vary depending on the type of food you choose and its calorie content. If you want to give canned, wet food as well, drop down to 1/4 to 1/3 cup of dry food and 1/2 to 1 can of wet food.

**Q** How else can my cat lose weight?

More play time! Try to increase your cat's exercise. A daunting task, I know, but your kitty will have more and more energy as the weight comes off. Try to do at least one play session per day with a toy such as a laser pointer, crinkled paper, feather, or anything that gets your kitty excited. You can take dry food pellets (out of the usual daily serving) and throw them -- so your kitty has to run and get it. You can even try walking the bowl of food up and down the stairs a few times with the kitty in tow before putting it down.

Finally, regular weight checks will help you monitor progress. You can bring your kitty to the vet or use a scale that measures in pounds and ounces (try a baby or infant scale). Weigh your kitty every 4 to 6 weeks. What we're after is gradual weight loss over about 6 to 8 months for a happy, healthy, fit and trim feline. Remember, you have the power to optimize your kitty's health and wellbeing!



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