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Ask the Vet: Simple diet can help keep your cat fit

The simplest way to feed a cat is to fill a dish with dry cat food kibble and add more kibble to the dish as the level drops. Simple, in this manner, is the leading cause for obesity in cats.

As cats grow fatter, they can no longer reach their backs or under their tails to groom. Heavy scale accumulates on their backs and fecal soiling accumulates under their tails.

Coats of medium or long hair compound this problem with mats that form rapidly from lack of self-grooming. Large, tight mats are painful and trap warm air and moisture near the skin, predisposing the cat to itchy skin infections.

As time passes, many obese cats not only require many trips to the groomer but also daily medications for management of their osteoarthritis pain or diabetes. The simplicity of keeping a dish full of dry cat food kibble leads to extra travel, costs, medicating and stress for the household. Could this scenario be prevented?

Following a few guidelines when feeding will truly keep it simple for the long life of your cat. The amount of calories fed per day must not exceed the cat's energy expenditure in order to maintain normal body weight. You are in charge of the calories that your cat eats. If your cat is gaining weight, then he is simply consuming too many calories per day or your cat has a medical condition that predisposes him to weight gain. The former is much more common. Veterinary evaluation can reveal the truth.

Cats can be healthfully fed using either a dry kibble diet or a moist canned diet. However, the most recent physiologic understanding of the cat's carnivorous metabolic requirements makes a strong argument for feeding cats a moist canned diet instead of dry kibble whenever possible.

Except for some unique therapeutic diet formulas, canned food is lower in calorie content and higher in digestible protein content than an equal volume of dry kibble. Canned food also offers moisture to the body, whereas dry kibble requires the body to give up moisture for digestion. I have never examined an obese cat that is fed only canned food.

For cats that refuse to eat moist canned food or for cat owners that cannot fit feeding their cat two or three times a day into their schedule, offering a measured amount of dry kibble is an option. Let me remind you of the importance of measuring the volume of food so only the target calorie content is offered per day.

Unfortunately, rapid weight loss may result in life-threatening liver disease in cats. Advice for keeping your slim cat fit or safely helping your fat cat return to normal weight should be sought from your veterinarian. Weight loss exceeding 1 percent to 2 percent of body weight per week is excessive. Weight check visits to your veterinary office and using a baby scale or bathroom scale at home to measure weight change weekly can help prevent unsafe weight changes.

Knowing the volume of food and the brand of food that your cat eats will improve the value of discussion with your veterinarian. Call the food manufacturer for the calorie content of the food you are feeding if it is not stated on the package. Formulas often are used to calculate the calories needed to meet the energy requirements of cats, but these formulas are very inaccurate. We use them as starting points only, because energy expenditure of individual cats is so varied.

Special diets designed to help cats lose weight generally are made with higher protein content and balanced nutrient content per a smaller calorie meal. Obese cats especially will benefit from the additional safety and effect of a specially formulated weight loss diet. Some marginally fat cats can be managed very well by switching from dry kibble to canned food that is appropriate for the cat's life stage and feeding a 10 percent to 20 percent lower volume of calories per day.

Simplicity really can be achieved and maintained for the life of your cat with a little effort to learn about healthy choices and strategies to keep your cat fit.