

Feeding Fat Cats

Get the skinny on feline obesity issues.

By Scott and Ann Springer

Garfield is the icon of the all-American fat cat. But feline obesity is no laughing matter. It is a serious health concern that all owners should be aware of.

Obesity is the No. 1 feline health problem in most countries in which cats are house pets, says Jim Boelke, president of Neenah, Wis.-based Cat Dancer Products Inc.

Some owners may not realize their cats weigh in as obese, but a few extra pounds can have a large impact on a cat.

"Three extra pounds on a cat is like 40 extra pounds on an average human," says Kurt Iverson, external relations manager for The Iams Co. in Dayton, Ohio.

Sometimes Less Is More

If your cat is obese as a result of other health problems, you can establish a plan to shed those unwanted pounds.

Overfeeding is a common reason for obesity. "Cats tend to be grazers," Iverson says. "By tightly controlling the daily feeding to the recommended guidelines on every bag, most problems can be avoided."

Another method to counteract overfeeding is to offer meals periodically throughout the day to your cats.

Cats living in multiple-cat households may be sneaking more than their fair share at meal time. "Stores have timing bowls that reveal meal portions at different times of the day, or over a few days for short travel periods," Iverson says.

Treats may be a dangerous addition to a cat's diet if you overindulge.

"Treats add calories that aren't always counted, so they can make a cat fat all by themselves if too much is provided," Iverson says.

Low-calorie treats may be a better option for owners who are training their cats or who can't resist spoiling them.

Iverson says owners should eliminate table scraps that can defeat the benefits of the complete and balanced nutrition a formula food offers.

Exercise can burn calories and also has other health benefits. "Lighter food and less food are important, but you have to put exercise into the formula," Boelke says. "It's the third leg of the stool."

Some cats, including senior cats, may not jump at the chance to increase their heart rate.

"House cats can be difficult to exercise," says Matthew Porter, employee supervisor at Incredipet in Lexington, Ky.

Cats have a different mentality than dogs, says Amy Brickle, product manager at the Golden, Colo.-based Kong Co.

"Cats say, 'You have to give me something really good to get me to play and to come out from lying around.' "

Interactive toys, catnip toys and toys with erratic movement may persuade a kitty to abandon its sunny napping spot to burn some calories, says Chuck Costello, marketing director at Kong.

Mentally challenging cat toys may keep cats at a healthier weight.

"Cats love those crinkly toys and laser pointers," Porter says. "You can really get some games going with those."

Mix meal time with play time by putting dry kibble into a toy.

"Making kibble feeding a game can help lengthen the feeding process, provide a mental challenge and discourage gorging at the bowl," Iverson says.

Leash training can be successful if you start cats off at an early age. Short and frequent walks, 15 to 20 minutes at a time, are best for cats that have less stamina than dogs, Porter says.

"By slowly acclimating the pet to the feel of the harness and leash for increasing periods of time, cats can enjoy the same sort of exercise that's common for dog owners to employ," Iverson says.

Indoor cats are more likely to be sedentary, but don't be fooled. Some outdoor cats may not be getting enough exercise.

"You still have to monitor them because it depends on the cat," Boelke says. "If the cat is obese, you need to make an adjustment."

Keep in mind that cats are fickle creatures, so variety is a necessity.