

Are You Making Your Cat Fat?

Test your knowledge of feline fitness do's and don'ts.

By Rebecca Sweat

Posted Nov. 5, 2008, 3 a.m. EDT

Cats put on weight the same way people do: too many calories taken in and not enough physical activity to burn up calories. The extra pounds can create a lot of the same kinds of health problems in cats as are seen in people. That includes ailments such as diabetes, arthritis, heart disease, cancer, pancreatitis and liver disease, along with difficulty walking, running, getting up and down, and breathing.

The difference, however, between feline obesity and human obesity, is who's to blame. If you put on extra pounds, you can be quite sure it's due to choices you made relating to food intake and activity level. Your cat, of course, is not making the same lifestyle choices. You are making these decisions for him. You're the one choosing what foods he'll be eating and creating an environment for your cat that either does or doesn't stimulate physical activity.

So are the steps you're taking at home going to lead to your cat having a weight problem in the future? Find out with this dietary quiz.

1. Do you give your cat table scraps?
 - a. Yes, usually at dinner, several times a week.
 - b. Every now and then, when it is something my cat really likes.
 - c. Rarely or never.
2. Your cat's diet consists of:
 - a. 100 percent dry food
 - b. Half dry food, half canned food
 - c. All or the majority canned food and no more than 20-30 percent dry food
3. You put your cat's allotted portion of food in his bowl (the amount recommended by your veterinarian) and within a couple of minutes, the food's been gobbled up. Your cat immediately races over to you and starts meowing for more food. You then ...
 - a. Get up from the couch where you were watching television, go into the kitchen and grab the bag of liver treats from the pantry, and go back to your couch and give your cat the bag of treats to eat while you finish your hot fudge sundae.
 - b. Either yell at the cat or turn up the volume on the television so you can't hear his pleas for more food.
 - c. Get out your cat's fishing pole toy and immediately start playing with him to get his mind off food.
4. What does your cat do when you're away at work all day?
 - a. What cats do: sleep!
 - b. Certainly some napping, but you know he also gets in a few hunts, judging by the dead mice and the overturned knick-knacks you discover when you come home.
 - c. He keeps busy at least part of the time, searching for his meal — the dry kibble you've scattered and hidden around your house for him to "hunt down" while you're away — and climbing up and down the cat trees and kitty exercise centers you've provided for him.
5. When choosing a commercially prepared treat for your cat, you usually look for one that includes:
 - a. Flavor enhancers, so that it'll really stimulate your cat's taste buds.
 - b. High carbohydrate content
 - c. High protein content
6. What do you do when you're home in the evenings?
 - a. Eat dinner and then relax with your cat in front of the television until you go to bed.
 - b. Bring work home with you from the office and catch up on housework while your cat follows

you around the house.

c. Do something to get your cat moving — either take him on a walk or play with him a while, in addition to relaxing and watching TV, and making dinner or doing other household chores.

7. How many cats do you live with?

- a. One
- b. Two
- c. Three or more

8. When deciding how much food to put in your cat's dish, you usually...

- a. Fill the bowl up to the rim.
- b. Put in the amount the manufacturer recommends on the package.
- c. Put in the amount recommended by your veterinarian, which is generally about 20 percent less than what the feeding guidelines state on the label.

9. How often do you take your cat in to see the veterinarian for a physical examination (including a weigh-in and body condition score)?

- a. Only when my cat shows signs of illness
- b. Every couple years
- c. Once a year if yours is a middle-aged or younger cat; every six months if your cat is a senior

10. What kind of feeding schedule do you use with your cat?

- a. Dry food left out for the cat "free choice" (meaning it is available all the time), plus canned cat food in the morning and evening, along with daily cat treats.
- b. No special mealtimes; just dry food left out "free choice" at all times, plus some treats.
- c. Food is offered twice a day — at morning and in the evening. No "free choice" feeding but some occasional treats, especially as motivational rewards during training.

11. You had a great day at work so you're going to celebrate with a steak for dinner tonight. You've decided you're going to make it a great evening for your cat too, so you ...

- a. Buy your cat a large can of his favorite cat food and let him gobble up the whole can while you're scarfing down your T-bone steak.
- b. Swing by the grocery store and pick up some water-packed canned tuna so you can give a few bites to your fur ball for a treat after dinner.
- c. Spend extra time playing with your cat either before or after dinner because you feel happy and carefree.

12. How many cat trees, cat towers, climbing posts and cat exercise gyms do you have in your home?

- a. Zero
- b. 1-2
- c. 3 or more

13. Your cat climbs on your lap and you notice he has a lot more padding around his torso than he did a year ago. You tell yourself...

- a. He might be pudgy, but he's cute!
- b. I know I need to get my cat on a weight-loss program sometime in the future, but it's going to have to wait until my schedule eases up and I have time to take him to the veterinarian for a nutritional consultation.
- c. I'm calling the veterinarian right now to see what I need to do to get my cat in better shape.

14. Which price category of food do you usually choose?

- a. Bargain-priced or generic foods (which are typically high in grain fillers and fat)
- b. Medium-priced "supermarket brand" foods
- c. Premium or specialty diets

15. In your household, who decides when it's time to feed your cat?

- a. My cat — he's meows at me when he wants to eat, and I feed him whenever he tells me he's hungry.
b. Sometimes me, sometimes my cat. It just depends on what I'm doing and how pushy my cat's being.
c. Me; I feed my cat with set mealtimes every day, pretty much the same time each day.
16. When you feel like you want to show your furry friend you love him, what do you do?
a. Get out the bag of semi-moist food treats and offer a few to Kitty.
b. Give him a hug and say "I wuv you so much!"
c. Spend a few minutes playing with your cat using an interactive toy.
17. Have you ever tried leash-training your cat
a. Nope. I don't believe you can walk cats like you can dogs.
b. Yes, but it wasn't exactly a pleasant experience, for me or my cat.
c. Yes. I take my cat on walks around the neighborhood on a regular basis.
18. When you buy a toy for your cat, it's usually something along the line of ...
a. A toy mouse that has been stuffed with catnip.
b. A stuffed animal that squeaks.
c. An interactive toy such as a fishing pole, laser pointer or feather teaser.
19. Do you ever buy canned cat food labeled "chunks in gravy" or "with added gravy"?
a. Yes, quite regularly.
b. Only occasionally.
c. Never.
20. How much exercise does your cat get?
a. Very little, if any. Mostly all my cat does is eat and sleep!
b. Every once in a while when I have time to play games with my cat.
c. Quite a bit! I play games with my cat for a few minutes most every night, and I take steps to try to keep him active during the day while I'm away (such as providing multilevel cat trees to climb on, putting food and water dishes on a different floor of the house than where the kitty condos are, placing a cat ledge in front of a window that looks out to a bird feeder, etc.).

Scoring

Give yourself one point for every "c" answer in the test above. Deduct a point for every "a" answer. Where you've answered with a "b," that's a neutral response and doesn't do anything to the score. Tally up the total number of points and grade yourself according to the scale below.

Less than 5 points:

Your cat is definitely on his way to becoming a chunky monkey, if he isn't already one. That's due to lack of activity and consuming too many calories — and ultimately to steps you are or aren't taking.

If you love your cat, do him a favor and take him to your veterinarian for a thorough physical exam and some dietary advice. Your veterinarian may recommend a weight-reduction diet for your cat and an exercise regimen. These are important measures to get your cat's weight down to what it should be. Taking action now will prevent problems down the road. Don't wait until your cat shows signs of obesity-related ailments to do something about his weight.

6-14 points:

You're not caving in to your cat's desires to pork out and live the couch-potato lifestyle, but he's not exactly going to get the Presidential Physical Fitness Award either. He's just in average or so-so shape. This is a cat that could probably benefit from a few new toys to get him moving, some towers or exercise gyms to climb up and down, or perhaps a feline companion to chase around the house (if he's a single cat).

If you're feeding 100 percent dry food (which is generally high in carbohydrate and fillers, thus very fattening) and lots of treats and table scraps, consider switching over to at least a partially canned food diet. Choose a high-quality brand rather

than a discount food. Low-cost foods generally require cats to eat a lot more of it to get the nutrients they need, and in the process they consume a lot of extra fats and grain fillers, compared to if they were eating a more moderately- or higher-priced food.

Don't give food free choice. Have two set mealtimes a day and limit treats (save them for rewards for good behavior). Avoid giving your cat a lot of catnip or foods with added flavor enhancers (which stimulate the appetite) and foods with gravy (which offer little nutrition but a lot of "empty" calories). In so doing, your cat will be on his way to attaining a svelte physique!

15-20 points:

Congratulate yourself. Not only are you avoiding the pitfalls that lead to obesity in house cats, you're actively working at keeping your feline pal lean and healthy! You don't overfeed him with fattening foods, and you're doing everything humanly possible to keep a feline active. If you or your veterinarian have done a body score on your cat, chances are your pet's weight is within the healthy range. That's the goal. Keep up the good work!

Rebecca Sweat is a freelance writer specializing in pet and family topics. She lives in the Dallas area with her husband, two sons and many pets.