

The Hunger Game: Weight Management for Your Fat Cats

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Obesity has become an epidemic among our feline patients. Unfortunately managing weight is a complex and often frustrating endeavour. Metabolic challenges, cat behaviour, and a well-meaning caregiver are all factors that can keep those tabbies tubby.

When forced to fend for itself, the domestic cat predominantly eat small prey including birds and mice. The average mouse is approximately 30kcal and the average cat adult needs to eat 6 – 8 mice per day. As it is not likely these mice magically show to be voluntarily consumed, the cat must hunt to catch each meal. From a hunting perspective, cats are not very successful. With only a 10% estimated kill rate, this means that for every 10 mice they hunt, they will only catch one. To ensure they get their daily kcals, they will offset this low success rate by hunting for 6 – 8 hours per day. But who wants to be successful 10% of the time? As with any behaviour, cats will always be working to be more successful at their hunting. Translated into the home environment, it is hard to outstubborn a cat. They will always be looking to figure out what behaviours/meows/postures work to get what they want - including treats and food. Therefore when we diet cats we have to have a plan to counter these behavioural challenges with extra client support and alternative feeding strategies.

We are fortunate that there are many alternatives to the conventional pet food bowl. Autofeeders allow caregivers to be “taken out of the food equation” while microchip feeders allow for individualized feeding plans within the multi-cat home. Puzzle feeders can be advantageous at forcing a cat to slow down their eating while also providing them with mental enrichment. However offering feeding strategies are only part of the weight management equation. Ultimately to lose weight we need to induce a calorie deficit in the cat. This can be achieved by portion restriction and increasing metabolic rate. Once a target kcal has been made, we can convert this to a food portion. But not all diets are created equal and not all diets can be used for weight loss. Veterinary weight loss diets are designed to calorie restrict and still have enough bulk to make the cat feel satiated while meeting their micronutrient requirements. These are features not always found in pet or grocery store “weight loss” formulas.

References/Resources:

Little, SE. The Cat: Clinical Medicine and Management, 1st edition. Elsevier 2012.

www.foodpuzzlesforcats.com