

Our Cat was Too Fat!

Our eleven-year-old cat (nicknamed Troubs) was recently diagnosed as being too fat! As a large tortoiseshell, she should weigh about 5.5 kg. However, when we took her to the vet she was 6.8 kg! So I set myself the task of exploring the causes, symptoms and treatment of obesity to ensure her recovery and future good health and wellbeing.

Obesity, the most common nutritional disorder in cats, is not just being overweight, but involves the accumulation of excess body fat. If not addressed, obesity can be a major factor in many feline diseases and ailments, some of which can be fatal. Diabetes mellitus, arthritis, liver disease (hepatic lipidosis), shortness of breath especially after exercise, skin problems, greater risk during anaesthesia and surgery, and heart disease all have links to obesity. Fortunately, Troubs seems to have escaped any of these diseases and ailments.

The main causes of obesity appear to be high carbohydrate diets, lack of exercise and overfeeding. Overfeeding obviously leads to consumption of more calories than the body needs. In addition, many commercial products, which many of us feed to our cats, do not mimic the animal's natural diet and are overly rich in calories. Additives and preservatives contained in many commercial foods encourage the generation of fatty deposits, which cannot be dissolved in water or excreted through the kidneys. Snacks and treats between meals can also add to the obesity problem (Meredith, 1998).

Lack of exercise can also be a major causative factor and may result from lifestyle, boredom and/or age. Keeping cats indoors may well ensure their safety but also results in a decrease of physical activity. Boredom may add to this decrease. If cats have nothing or no-one to play with, they will cope with their boredom by curling up and sleeping for hours on end. Troubs became much less active after her mother and aunt died and seems to miss their joint hunting expeditions.

Other likely causes include: genetic or hereditary predisposition, rearing of kittens (fat kittens make fat cats), having been spayed or neutered and ingestion of certain medicines.

The ideal weight for cats varies. Males, for example, are usually 1-2 kg heavier than females of the same breed. In the case of larger breeds, "a fully-grown male Maine Coon can weigh 18 kg without being the least overweight. A female of a smaller breed, the Singapura, may actually be overweight at 3 kg! Cats that are not purebred should usually weigh 3.5-5.5 kg, depending on their bone structure" (www.TheCatSite.com).

Symptoms of obesity can vary from cat to cat and can include: difficulty in climbing, walking, running, jumping and grooming themselves, excessive appetite for food, and noticeably sedentary habits. Troubs certainly showed some of these symptoms. She had difficulty navigating our cat flap and jumping onto the bar stools in the kitchen. Her appetite was also excessive. She was also depressed after losing her mother.

Together with our vet we worked out a plan for Troubs' gradual weight loss over a fixed time period, together with a specially formulated low-calorie diet and an exercise/play regime. I was advised that the weight must be lost gradually over three to four months. Crash diets can be dangerous as rapid weight loss may induce liver disease. The vet recommended Hill's

prescription dry-food r/d diet. I was told to give Troubs 60 grammes daily, in small amounts throughout the day. The product contains added fibre to help cats to feel full, and balanced protein to support lean body mass. She was on this diet for about two months. I took her to the free “weight watcher clinic” offered at our vet’s practice. She definitely lost weight but I was not happy with the dried-food diet. Her coat deteriorated, her fur came out in tufts and she developed dandruff. Her previous diet consisted mainly of ‘real’ food (raw and cooked), along with some commercial pet food (dried, moist and canned) and a few self-caught mice! I returned her to a homemade natural diet but reduced the quantities. I used Schultze’s (2008) guidance on recipes and supplements. A cat’s stomach is quite small so two to three tablespoons of food, provided at conveniently-spaced intervals two to three times a day, is about right.

I am also monitoring the exercise she is getting and making more time available to play with her. This is really paying off. She thinks its playtime but I know it is a serious work out!

So Troubs is almost back to her ideal weight. It was hard work but certainly worth it.

References:

- Meredith, B., 1998, Is your cat too fat? London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Schultze, K. R., 2008, Natural Nutrition for Cats, USA, Hay House.
- www.TheCatSite.com

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