**Helping your Cat to a Healthy Body Weight**

Keeping our pet cats indoors has many benefits, and some risks. Benefits include less chance of getting hurt or sick, risks include anxiety, boredom, and the weight gain that can result from these. Based on the research we have, we offer this program to help you help your cat live a healthier, happier life with you in your home.

**The Outline**

**Step 1:** Like any program that changes what you are doing, helping your cat will take some time and energy. If your own life isn't in a place for this, take care of yourself first - it is the best thing you can do for yourself and your cat.

**Step 2:** When you are ready to go, start with a visit to your veterinarian to be sure this program is right for you.

**Step 3:** Set yourself up for success.

**Step 4:** Help your cat lose 10% of her current weight over about 6 months.

**Step 5:** Sustain your gains.

**The Details**

**Step 1:** Cats that live with us quickly learn to read our moods - their survival depends on it. If your life isn't in a place where you can focus some time and energy on helping your cat to a healthy weight, that is OK. Better to take care of yourself than add another task that might risk your relationship with your cat (and others).

**Step 2:** If you are like many cat owners, veterinary visits have been a stressful experience. Fortunately, there are now veterinarians who can help you take the stress out of cat care. These links will help you find Cat Friendly Practices and Fear Free Practices in your area. Please share this program with your doctor to be sure it is right for you.

**Step 3:** Set yourself up for success by making sure your home is as cat friendly as possible. This means to be sure that ***ALL*** of your cats *each* have ***ALL*** of the resources they need to thrive in your home, to avoid conflict among them. Resources include:

1. Informed owners - do you know who cats are? How to read their body language to know what they are telling you about how they feel? If not, read this: (link)
2. Safety - cats need safe, quiet "personal spaces" (just like many of us do) where they can be left alone to rest, eat, and go to the toilet. A cat carrier put in a location in your home where the cat will feel safe is a good start. Be sure that the litter box is also in a safe place, and away from where your cat eats and rests.
3. Choice - cats know what they like, and they can tell us. Any time you provide your cat a new space, food, litter or other resource, let them choose whether or not to use it - would you want any less for yourself?
4. Places to climb and scratch - all cats need these, and giving them what they need will save your things, including your curtains and furniture. Choice is important here, too!
5. Interactions - with you and your home! One of the best ways to tell if your cat is thriving is that she likes to be around you and exploring her surroundings. She may not sit in your lap, and may have a health problem that keeps her from playing, but if she is hiding or trying to get away, start with the steps above to give her the safety and choice she needs to cope with life in your home.

Step 3 can be a big step for some cat owners, especially those with more than one cat. Don't rush it, your success depends on having done this work before moving on to:

**Step 4:** Help your cat lose 10% of her current weight. First, why 10%? Because across species it has been found to give all of the health benefits of weight loss, and honestly getting back to a young, lean weight isn't likely - or necessary for better health.

1. Buy a scale, preferably two; one to weigh food (essential for success), the other to weigh your cat (helpful)\*.
2. Weigh how much TOTAL food - diet, treats, everything you give your cat each day for a few days to be sure you have a good idea of how much she eats each day.
3. IF POSSIBLE, introduce a food puzzle to feed your cat instead of a bowl. There are details about how to do this at http://foodpuzzlesforcats.com.
4. Diet - there are many diets that can be used to support weight loss, including (Amy, links to yours here?). Your veterinarian may be able to help you here. Basically, cats seem to do best on high protein diets, offered as choices to let your cat decide which one she likes best.
5. Reduce the amount fed by 10%. For example, if you feed 50 grams of dry food each day, 10% less is 45 grams. Most people can't tell this difference by looking, which is why a scale is essential. The amount fed will need to be decreased further as the cat loses weight, but 10% allows both you and the cat to "ease into" the process.
6. Find other activities for you and your cat to keep your minds off of the weight loss. If you don't have anything to do but wait for the next meal, getting to a healthy weight will be a lot harder.
7. Signs of success. When cats can live in a "cat-friendly" home for a few months, they can get to and stay at a healthier weight, explore their surroundings, and play and interact with their owners more than before.

**Step 5:** Sustain your gains. Like bathing and brushing one's teeth, maintaining a healthy weight is the work (and opportunity) of a lifetime. If all is going well and you want to help your cat lose more weight, now might be a good time for a quick checkup to be sure everything is going well from your veterinarian's point of view.

**\*How to weigh your cat - training your cat to sit on a scale.** The best way to help your cat achieve and maintain a healthy weight is to weigh her weekly. Here are some tips to help you and your cat enjoy the process:

1. Buy a baby scale, put it in a safe, quiet place for your cat, and cover the weighing surface with a fleece or towel that has your cat’s scent on it.
2. Introduce the scale on a day you can stay around the home to observe your cat’s reaction to it. Place it in a safe place and let your cat find it on her own.
3. Give your cat her favorite treat close to the scale, and put more on the scale to get her to walk onto it.
4. Praise and treat your cat for sitting on the scale.
5. Weigh your cat regularly so she sees the activity as a source of treats. (you can also feed your cat's regular meals on the scale if the cat is amenable to it!)

**Troubleshooting Healthy Weight Management for Cats (adapted from1)**

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| **Cat factors** | **Potential Solutions to Consider** |
| Begging | * Most begging is for attention, which we confuse with hunger. Respond by tossing a toy for the cat to chase, petting or distracting her attention rather than with food.
* Provide environmental enrichment.
* Feed using a food puzzle.
* Feed smaller meals more frequently.
* Place food to encourage activity (e.g., on a cat tree or rolled across a smooth floor).
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| Food searching on counters | * Increase physical activity and environmental enrichment.
* Add other places to climb.
* Make counters less appealing by putting food away, and covering with foil or carpet runner turned upside-down.
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| Nighttime activity and/or yowling | * Feed smaller amounts when away from the home.
* Play with cat and then feed a larger meal before bedtime.
* Provide food in toys or puzzles overnight.
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| Not enough activity | * Provide automatic toys for the cat to use when home alone.
* Explore day care, pet sitter services, or hiring neighbors or teens.
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| Other pets in the home | * Change food for all pets if feasible.
* Use food puzzles to slow down and separate feedings.
* Separate pets based on their physical abilities or size differences (e.g., food box with small hole for small cat; cat food high up, not accessible to dogs or other cats).
* Use feeding products that restrict crate or feeder access with a magnetic collar.
* Provide extra meals in a separate space for pets not needing food restriction.
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| Cat won't eat a new diet | * Review and enhance environmental enrichment.
* Offer half of the new food next to half of the usual food in a separate container. Once the new food is accepted, slowly remove the usual food and increase the new food over a week or so until only the new food is fed.·
* Try to avoid letting cats to go longer than a day or so without eating anything at all.
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| Cat stops losing weight | * Decide if the cat has lost enough weight for health reasons.
* If not, decrease food provided by 10% to continue weight loss.
* Reassess environment to ensure that no conflict between cats has developed.
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| **Human factors** |
| You don't like the new diet | * Explain your food type preferences and ask for help finding a compromise that meets your as well as your cat's needs.
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| Others in the home feeding your cat | * Engage everyone in the healthy weight effort.
* Explain the benefits of a healthy weight and ask for support.
* Premeasure all food and treats for the day so everyone knows how much total food the cat can receive each day.
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| Frustration or fatigue from efforts | * Helping your cat regain a healthy weight can be hard; be gentle with yourself.
* Identify specific frustrations and ask for help from your veterinary caregivers.
* Request an in-home veterinary visit to better assess the overall situation.
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| Guilt | * Recall that what looks like begging for food is often begging for attention.
* Remind yourself of the health and longevity benefits of a healthy weight.
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| 1*Brooks D, Churchill J, Fein K, et al.* [*2014 AAHA weight management guidelines for dogs and cats*](https://www.aaha.org/globalassets/02-guidelines/weight-management/2014-AAHA-Weight-Management-Guidelines-for-Dogs-and-Cats)*. J Am Anim Hosp Assoc 2014;50:1-11.* |

**References**

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3. Ellis SL, Rodan I, Carney HC, et al. [AAFP and ISFM feline environmental needs guidelines.](https://catvets.com/guidelines/practice-guidelines/environmental-needs-guidelines) *J Feline Med Surg* 2013;15:219-230.
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