Cat Food: Weight Control FAQs

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How can I prevent my cat from gaining weight?

If your cat eats more calories than she burns, she will gain weight. If your cat seems to be gaining weight, first consult your veterinarian to ensure that the weight gain is not the result of an underlying health problem. Your veterinarian can also help you set up a weight-loss program, track progress, and answer any questions along the way. Your veterinarian will likely advise you to feed your cat fewer high-calorie treats and snacks, feed smaller amounts of your cat's regular food (or switch to a lite/reduced-calorie food), and increase the amount of exercise your cat receives daily.

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How do I tell if my cat is overweight?

First feel for your cat's ribs. You should be able to feel the ribs quite easily. There should be a slight amount of fat over them, but each rib should be distinct. If you can see the ribs, your cat is too thin. If you cannot feel them at all, your cat is very overweight.

Second, check the area near the base of your cat's tail. There should be a small amount of fat covering this area and it should feel smooth overall. If the bones protrude, your cat is too thin; if you cannot feel any bones at all, your cat is very overweight.

Third, feel other bony prominences on the cat's body such as the spine, shoulders, and hips. Again, you should be able to feel a small amount of fat over these areas. If these bones are easily felt or visible, your cat is too thin. If you cannot feel the bones beneath the layer of fat, the animal is obviously overweight.

Fourth, look at your cat from above. The animal should have a definite waist behind the ribs. If the waist is extreme or if bony prominences are visible, the animal is too thin. If there is no waist, or worse yet, the area between the ribs and hips is wider than the hips or ribs, your cat is grossly overweight.

Fifth, look at your cat from the side. Cats should have an abdominal tuck (the area behind the ribs should be smaller in diameter than the chest). An animal who is too thin will have a very severe abdominal tuck. Overweight animals will have no abdominal tuck.

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How fast should my cat lose weight?

In general, a good goal for cat weight loss is 0.5-2.0% of its body weight per week. A weight loss of 2% or more per week can cause more harm than good. It is especially important that obese cats do not lose weight too rapidly.

Do I have to use a reducing diet if my pet is supposed to lose weight? Some cats, even those who do not have to lose a large amount of weight, will do fine on a lesser amount of their normal food. Cats who are on a special diet because of another condition (e.g., kidney disease) should remain on that diet and simply be fed less of it.

However, a balanced commercial weight reduction diet does offer several advantages. First, weight reduction diets are generally high-fiber, low-fat diets which have a low energy density and allow a greater loss of body fat than simply feeding smaller amounts of a high-fat diet. This is because fat contains over twice as many calories as protein and carbohydrates and low-calorie dense foods tend to produce satiety (a feeling of being full) at a lower level of calorie intake. In addition, more energy is used in digesting and absorbing low-fat, high-fiber diets. Finally, weight reduction diets contain the proper amount

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of vitamins and minerals per serving size. By feeding less of your cat's regular food, you are also decreasing the level of protein, vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients your cat receives. These differences could be eliminated by using supplements, but it is something you should be aware of.
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Why did my pet gain weight when I fed according to the manufacturer's recommendations?

The label recommendations provide guidelines based on caloric needs of what the manufacturer considers to be an "average" cat with "average" activity. Often, many cats will gain excess weight if fed what cat food manufacturers suggest. It is a good idea to start at the low end of the suggested amount, monitor your cat's weight for several weeks, then adjust the amount fed accordingly.

Also consider what else your cat may eat. If your cat typically gets table scraps, treats, and a "little something to make the food taste better," these are probably the reason your cat is gaining excess weight. The calories in "little extras" add up very quickly.
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