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Feline Feeding Behaviour and Obesity

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Obesity is a serious problem in cats, putting them at risk of developing a number of medical conditions including diabetes mellitus, liver problems and other life-threatening diseases.

This article looks at the link between feline obesity and behaviour and shows how the provision of a feeding regime, that fulfils their species-specific needs, can help to prevent obesity, assist with weight loss and improve their mental health.

Modern cat foods are extremely tasty and their formulation makes them easy to consume rapidly. This approach to feeding means cats have no need to search for food, leaving a void in their mental and physical time-budget. To make matters worse, if a cat has little else to do without much to occupy its mind, eating can be used as an activity to relieve boredom.

Obese cats find it much more difficult to embark on natural physical behaviours such as climbing, jumping and playing. This exacerbates existing obesity and also reduces the cat's opportunity to live a full life.

Unfortunately, weight reduction programmes can be challenging to implement and frequently fail to take the cat's natural feeding habits into account. Restrictions in feeding frequency can have a dramatic effect on their behaviour, leading to the development of problematic behaviours such as frustration. This can manifest in aggression which can be directed to owners and other cats in the household.



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Some Facts about Feline Feeding Behaviour

- **Naturally, cats are solitary hunters** and therefore prefer to eat alone. In the wild, prey is low in calories which means the cat needs to make several kills per day to meet their nutritional requirements.
- **Most domestic cats still retain a strong hunting instinct** and those that can access outdoors spend a lot of their time searching and trying to catch prey. This allows them to expend large amounts of physical and mental energy.
- **Cats associate their food intake with water consumption.** Therefore regular meals can encourage greater water consumption which is good for kidney and bladder health. However, it is important to note that cats prefer their water to be in multiple sites, in a separate location to their food and in a ceramic or glass bowl (not plastic).

- **Meowing and rubbing against an owner's legs are greeting behaviours and not a request for food.** Unfortunately, because most cats do this after an owner returns from work or a period of absence, it usually coincides with meal times. This behaviour then becomes associated with feeding and is reinforced each time the owner responds by giving food. Over-eating occurs if this behaviour is repeated whenever they see their owner and they comply by feeding. Instead, the cat should be greeted back by stroking them or saying hello but withhold feeding until later.

Recommendations for Feeding

The main aim should be to try to simulate the cat's natural feeding behaviour. This involves providing opportunities for play, predation and foraging behaviours. Here are some ideas:

1. **Mimic natural hunting behaviours:**
Use foraging feeders and food

puzzles to encourage the cat to get interactive. You can purchase these or try making your own. One idea is to fill an ice cube tray with wet food which slows down eating and encourages a cat to manipulate the food with their paws. Another is to stab holes in the side of a small plastic drinking bottle, making sure they are large enough to allow dried kibble to fall out. Place dried food inside the bottle and replace the lid. As the cat rolls the bottle the dried pieces should fall out.



Also try hiding food around the house and set up food trails. Delivery of food in this way means that the cat has to work to obtaining food and the small portions, consumed over a period of time, provides a more natural way of feeding.

Remember that it can take a cat some time to get used to interactive feeding so make changes gradually. Help them out to begin with and start off by making it easy so they can practice their new skills without getting frustrated. Over time most cats do get the hang of it and begin to work it out for themselves. For more information and ideas on using interactive feeders visit: www.foodpuzzlesforcats.com

2. Initiate play before feeding: Playing with your cat can be fun and a good way of spending quality time together. Fur lined toys that emit a squeak and rods with feathers attached can mimic prey and may help fulfil a cat's predatory behaviour.



Once the play session is over you can simulate the kill by presenting their food.

Cats can get bored quickly, so make sure you have a range of different types of feeders and toys so they can be rotated regularly to maintain interest.

3. Use automatic feeders: These can be particularly useful for indoor cats when owners are out all day. Timers can be set to deliver small portions of food at regular intervals throughout the day.

4. Add some variety to their diet: Feeding a variety of different foods may decrease boredom and

begging, which may subsequently decrease the temptation to overfeed. However, avoid too many high calorie food types and treats.

5. Prevent conflict by feeding cats separately: Because cats prefer to eat frequently and alone, there can be tension if they are under pressure to eat in close proximity to other cats in the household. Therefore, to prevent conflict and internal stress (which may or may not be obvious), it is far better to give each cat a separate, and private, feeding station. Choose quiet locations where they cannot be over-looked by other cats (or pets).

Benefits to this Feeding Programme

- Play and mentally enriching tasks help with the release of endorphins, the natural feel-good hormones.
- Providing more frequent meals can help build a better cat-owner relationship by increasing the opportunities for positive interactions.
- More frequent feeding allows the cat to demonstrate natural behaviours, decreases frustration and leads to improved mental health.
- Simulating predation enables a cat to play out their innate drive for hunting, without having a negative impact on wildlife.
- This approach to feeding is extremely beneficial for indoor cats who are more at risk of developing obesity and can become bored.

Obesity is an increasing problem but it is reversible. However it can be difficult to reduce a cat's weight. Therefore as well as following these recommendations, it is also worthwhile speaking to your vet. They can provide support through weight clinics, specially formulated diets and access to other useful resources.

Better still, adapting this approach to feeding from the start, helps avoid weight gain and promotes a healthy body and mind throughout the cat's life.