

How Owner Feeding Habits Influence Obesity in Cats

Cats are beloved members across millions of households across the United States, yet feeding practices vary significantly among owners. Alarming, about 60% of these pets are overweight or obese, and many owners are unaware of it. This is not due to neglect, but to various feeding habits such as overfeeding, specific diets, constant access to food, or excessive treats that unintentionally lead to weight gain. Without clear guidance on proper feeding habits feline obesity has become a growing concern. Understanding what, how much, and how often to feed is essential to promoting a healthy weight and ensuring a longer, higher-quality life for feline companions.

Veterinarians assess feline body condition with the Body Condition Score (BCS) scale, which ranges from 1-9. A score of 4-5 is considered ideal, 6-7 is overweight, and 8-9 is obese. Overweight cats weigh 10-20% above their ideal body weight, while obese cats weigh over 20% above their ideal weight. Current estimates indicate that 26.5% are overweight and 33.5% are obese, leaving only 37.8% in the healthy weight range. Despite this, 70% of cat owners believe their cat is an ideal weight, highlighting a significant disconnect between perception and reality.

Diet type and feeding frequency are major contributors to obesity risk. Data shows that 67% of owners feed both wet and dry food, 13% feed wet food only, and 9% rely exclusively on dry food – a practice associated with higher obesity risk due to its calorie density and lower moisture content. More concerning is that only 20% of owners measure food portions by weight, which is the most accurate method. The majority estimate serving sizes instead, often leading to unintentional overfeeding. Feeding frequency also matters. Free feeding and frequent feeding schedules are more commonly associated with excess weight gain. However, 30% of owners free

feed and 22% feed three or more times a day. Treats also add to the problem, with 52% of owners offering treats at least once a day.

Obesity in cats can cause detrimental effects. It can cause significant health risks that can shorten its lifespan and reduce its quality of life. Overweight cats are more prone to diabetes, arthritis and joint pain, heart and respiratory issues, complications during anesthesia/surgery, liver disease, and UTI's. Obesity can even reduce a cat's lifespan by 2-3 years and increase the likelihood of early onset age-related diseases.

Fortunately, cat owners can take proactive steps to prevent or manage obesity. These include measuring meals accurately, feeding based on ideal weight, scheduling regular meal times instead of free-feeding, incorporating wet food, and providing daily physical activity. Through informed and consistent care, owners can help their cats achieve and maintain a healthy weight – ensuring longer, healthier, and more fulfilling lives.

Feline obesity is a growing but preventable health concern that affects millions of pet cats across the US. Despite good intentions, many cat owners unknowingly contribute to this problem through inconsistent portion control, frequent feeding, and excessive treat use. By understanding the importance of a pet's diet, owners can make meaningful changes that will improve their pet's lives.