



Burlington Emergency & Veterinary Specialists

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Obesity, Diabetes, and Your Cat

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Obesity is a major nutritional problem in companion animals in the United States. Studies have estimated the incidence of overweight and obese cats to range between 19 and 40%. Obese cats are at higher risk for health problems compared to cat that maintain ideal weight. Obese cats are more prone to diabetes, liver disease, skin problems, urinary tract problems, and arthritis. For veterinarians, it is more difficult to provide proper medical care to overweight cats. During a physical examination, it is harder to feel the abdominal organs, more difficult to insert an intravenous catheter or to obtain urine via cystocentesis (inserting a needle into the bladder), and more challenging to obtain a good quality x-ray in overweight cats. Routine surgical or anesthetic procedures become more difficult, or even hazardous, when cats are overweight.

Diabetes is one of the most common glandular disorders in cats. Cats, like humans, can develop two types of diabetes. In type-1 diabetes, the pancreas is incapable of producing adequate amounts of insulin. In type-2 diabetes, the pancreas produces insulin, but the body does not recognize or respond properly to the insulin.

For years, diabetic cats were prescribed a diet high in fiber and low in fat. Fiber is a complex carbohydrate. It is metabolized very slowly, minimizing fluctuations in blood sugar, allowing for tighter regulation of the diabetes. Overweight cats do respond to these low fat/high fiber diets, losing weight in a fairly predictable fashion. Recent studies in feline nutrition and diabetes, however, have led to a change in thinking regarding the best diets for overweight and diabetic cats. It seems even our cats are about to get caught up in the low-carbohydrate craze that has swept the nation. For cats, though, it makes perfect sense: cats are pure carnivores.

Obesity occurs if a cat takes in more calories than it uses. Carbohydrates consumed in excess of energy needs will be converted for storage as fat.

Recent studies suggest that cats fed diets that are high in protein, high in fat, and low in carbohydrates are ideal for strict carnivores like the feline. Diets like these help keep cats slim, and prevent diabetes from developing. For cats with diabetes that are already receiving insulin injections, and for newly diagnosed diabetics, especially those that are overweight, a high protein/low carb diet may be an essential component of diabetes therapy.

High protein/low carb diets are not suitable for all cats. Cats with kidney disease should not be fed these diets.

Obesity is a health risk for all indoor cats. Providing your cat with a stimulating environment and plenty of play, as well as feeding a healthy diet, is essential for keeping your cat's weight in the ideal range. Evidence now suggests that high protein/low carbohydrate diets may be just the ticket for our carnivorous companions.