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 Melissa graduated from the University of Sydney in 1990. She worked in a private small animal practice in Adelaide for two years and then in England for a further two years. Melissa continued in private practice on her return to Sydney before starting Paddington Cat Hospital with her husband, Randolph Baral, in 1997. Melissa is interested in all aspects of feline medicine and has a particular liking for soft tissue surgery. Of course, Melissa was nominatively destined for feline medicine. 210 Oxford Street, Paddington NSW 2021
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The medical side effects of being overweight are well known, and include diabetes (which is compounded by dry food and lack of exercise), increased rates and degrees of arthritis, liver disease and lower urinary tract diseases (for example we see more overweight cats with blocked bladder, a life threatening condition). Something that is less talked about are the psychological effects of being overweight, and as this is not something we can ask cats about, we need to put ourselves in their shoes and imagine that less physical activity and less environmental enrichment will inevitably lead to some degree of laziness and even depression.

From personal experience I know that as my overweight kitty Jemima lost weight, she became much more active and interested in the world around her, not just following us with her eyes when we went in the direction of the kitchen! She became more playful and actively sought out games and activities, like looking for insects in the back garden. I am sure that she was a happier cat when she was a healthy weight.

OVERWEIGHT/OBESE CATS

There has been a lot of press over the past few years about the growing rates of obesity in the developed world, and in particular the US and Australia. We have certainly seen a parallel increase in our cat populations over a similar time period, due to a variety of factors, some of them mirroring those in the human world. As with people, obesity and excess bodyweight can have many consequences on both lifestyle and health, and getting your cat to a healthy start in life will stand it in good stead for many years.

When kittens are growing rapidly and are very active, it can be hard to overfeed them, but even at a young age it can be obvious which cats will be prone to putting on weight as they get older. Certain breeds are more food focused and have a heavier build than others (the Labradors of the cat world!), for example Burmese and British Shorthair cats. Activity levels tend to decrease when a cat reaches 2-3 years of age, and this is when they can start to get a bit heavy. Often the ideal weight for a cat is the weight it is at when it is 18 months to 2 years old, so that is a good aim to keep in mind. It is very helpful to know your cat's actual weight, so make sure your vet weighs puss each visit and records the weight, so you can refer back to previous records.

Unfortunately there is no simple fix when it comes to losing weight, and as with people the equation involves energy intake versus energy expenditure, ie how much they eat and how much exercise they do. We as their owners are the ones to determine what our pets eat, and so the first variable is the one we have most control over (unless they like to scavenge at the neighbours', in which case you may have to have a word with the neighbours, or put a special tag on the collar saying 'PLEASE DO NOT FEED ME!'). I often find when I start having this conversation with clients, that people don't really know how much their cat is eating, because they leave food constantly available, particularly dry food. This is something that needs to be changed, and in fact I recommend that owners always know how much they feed their animals, and feed in measured amounts (even from kittenhood). To work out how much food your cat is actually getting, I suggest that for a couple of days, you serve the same amount of food that you normally would, but before giving it to your cat, measure it in a measuring cup. You can then add up the total amount that you feed over a 24 hour period. Another common issue is that a lot of people think that feeding an entirely dry food diet is healthy. This is certainly something we do NOT recommend, even if it's a premium diet. And of course there are always the treats!! Sometimes we only find out about the little extras when the partner happens to mention the vegemite toast in the morning (and sometimes we have to read between the lines, like finding out how much the cat loves prawns when they haven't been mentioned as part of the diet!!). After we know how much the cat is eating, we can plan how to reduce the caloric intake. I often find that simply substituting a dry food meal with a tinned food meal will make a big difference, but this conversation is best had with your vet who knows your cats individual needs.

Having more than one cat in the household can make it more difficult to know how much each cat is actually eating, but is another very good reason to feed in particular meals and not leave food constantly available. I have found that giving multiple small meals (and only as much as each cat will eat at a sitting) seems to satisfy the appetite better than fewer larger meals.

Of course the other variable is energy output, and this isn't as easy with cats as it is with dogs. Cats who are confined indoors tend to be less active, but even some cats with outdoor access do very little exercise, so this is not necessarily the main problem. You will need to put some effort into this yourself, and find an activity that your cat enjoys and will participate in. Some cats love playing chase with a ball of scrunched up paper, whereas others may need more sophisticated toys like laser pointers or toy mice. Find something you both enjoy, and try to put aside 10 minutes each day to have some special play-bonding time together.

Keeping your cat at an optimal weight will not only provide them with a happier and healthier life, but has also been shown to lengthen their lifespan, and so giving both of you more time to enjoy each others company!

