Health Risks in Overweight or Obese Cats

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As in people, cats carrying extra pounds of weight place extra demands on virtually all the organs of their bodies. When we overload these organs, disease and sometimes death are the consequences. The health risks to overweight cats are serious and every cat owner should be aware of them. The more common consequences of obesity in cats are discussed below.

Diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes)

One of the most common complications of obesity in cats is the development of diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes). According to one study, heavy or obese cats are 2-4 times more likely to develop diabetes. Obesity causes an increase in the secretion of insulin in response to the increased blood glucose level in the overweight cat. Insulin is also more in demand simply because there is a greater amount of tissue in an overweight cat. When requirements for insulin exceed the ability of the body to produce insulin, diabetes mellitus develops. If the need for insulin increases over a long period of time, the cells in the pancreas which produce insulin can actually 'burn out,' again resulting in diabetes.

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Liver disease (hepatic lipidosis)

The liver stores fat so when a cat is overweight, an increased amount of fat builds up in the liver. This is called hepatic lipidosis, and is very common in overweight cats. This condition can result in decreased liver function. It can be life-threatening if an obese cat, for any reason, does not eat, loses weight rapidly, or is otherwise stressed.

Lameness and arthritis

The risk of lameness and arthritis in heavy or obese cats is 3-5 times that of cats with optimal weight. Possible reasons for this difference include the increased force on joints the extra weight may cause, such as when the cat jumps down from a high place. Other studies suggest overweight cats may actually produce abnormal cartilage.

Skin problems (dry, flaky skin, feline acne)

Obese cats are twice as likely to develop nonallergic skin conditions when compared to cats of optimal weight. Dry, flaky skin and feline acne were the two most common conditions observed in one study. Obese cats often have an inability to groom themselves adequately and this may result in skin problems developing as well.

Increased surgical and anesthetic risk

Veterinarians generally take extra precautions when anesthetizing and performing surgery on obese cats.

Many of the anesthetics are taken up by fat, so an overweight animal will take longer to come out of anesthesia because the anesthetic must be removed from the fat by the body. In addition, many anesthetics are broken down by the liver. A fatty liver may not be as efficient at breaking down anesthetics and other drugs, so again, recovery may be delayed.

The increased fat in the tissues makes surgery more difficult. Basically it is harder to find or get at what you are looking for. The fat obscures the surgical area. This makes the surgery technically more difficult and the procedure will also take longer, which again increases the anesthetic risk.

Decreased quality and length of life

It is evident from the above discussion that the health, ability to groom, and even to move, are diminished in overweight cats. Overweight cats may become more irritable due to being in pain or simply uncomfortable.

It is clear that we are not contributing positively to our cat's health when we allow them to become overweight. The next time you hear that pitiful 'meeeewwww' and pleading look which says, 'Can I please have a treat,' think very carefully first. In most cases, your answer should be 'No, and I'm doing this for your own good,' and it will be absolutely true.

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