9 Ways to End the Weight

Help a FAT Cat Become A Fit Kitty

Shannon Harris makes a living staying in shape. As a personal trainer and a fitness instructor in San Diego, California, Harris motivates others to eat right and select the right exercise plans to maintain strong, healthy bodies. Yet her cat, Mugsy, shook the scales at a hefty 23 pounds.

"It was so embarrassing being a fitness instructor and owning a really fat cat," Harris says. "I use to joke to people who visited my home that they needed to lift with their legs, not their backs, to pick up Mugsy to avoid injury."

Jokes aside, Harris also knew the health dangers Mugsy faced because of his obesity. The 8-year old cat was prone to weighty problems like diabetes, heart disease, liver disease and limited mobility. Two years ago, Harris consulted her father Lee Harris, DVM, a veterinarian in private practice in Federal Way, Washington. He prescribed a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet and carefully monitored Mugsy's progress.

Gradually, the ounces melted away and pounds disappeared. As Mugsy lost weight, he gained energy to play tag up and down the stairs with Harris.

Today, Mugsy weighs in at a muscular, slim 16 pounds – a picture of fitness.

"It worked," Harris says. "Mugsy doesn't hang around the food bowl with that look of starvation, and he definitely has more energy."

Your cat can make the trip from fat to fit, too. Success starts with you.

Take Those First Steps

Cats depend on what owners feed them. Humans have thumbs to open refrigerators; cats do not. Your cat also never borrows the car to sneak out and feast on fat-filled burgers and fries. You control your cat's diet. So, here's how to start:

- **Schedule a physical examination.** The doctors at Flanary Veterinary Clinic can rule out underlying health problems that can cause weight gain.
- **Agree on a weight-loss plan** that safely and effectively meets your cat's needs.
- **Schedule regular veterinary visits** to check your cat's progress.

Now, you are ready to trim back your cat's extra pounds with a two-front attack: nutrition and exercise. Dr. Flanary offers these nine ways to achieve feline fitness:

1. **Never put your cat on a crash diet.** Cats should never fast, says Grace Long, DVM, a veterinarian who markets therapeutic diets for Nestle Purina Company in St. Louis, Missouri. "Cats cannot go more than two days without eating. Otherwise, they risk the development of hepatic lipidosis, a very serious, sometimes deadly, fatty-liver syndrome," Long says. When a cat does not eat for 48 hours, the body begins to break down its own body fat and muscle as alternative energy sources. Higher concentrations of fat enter the bloodstream and deposits in the liver, causing it to malfunction.

   The liver disease aggravates the situation by causing a cat to lose its appetite. At that point, survival depends on forced feeding using a feeding tube in the esophagus.

2. **Introduce new food gradually.** If Flanary Veterinary Clinic recommends putting your cat on weight-reduction

commercial food such as r/d or m/d, don't go cold turkey. The transition to the new food should take three or four days. This enables your cat to make the switch without causing digestive problems.

3. **Go slowly.** Aim for a slow and steady weekly weight loss not to exceed 2% of your cat's total body weight. For example, an overweight 15-pound cat needs about 5 months to safely reach a healthy weight of 12 pounds according to Dr. Flanary.

4. **Measure daily portions.** Rather than dumping food into your cat's bowl, use a measuring cup to dole out the portion recommended by the doctors at Flanary Vet Clinic. Work with them to ensure you provide the proper portion – not too much or too little. A 12-pound cat, on average, requires 265 calories daily compared to a big-boned 20-pound cat that needs 442 calories a day.

5. **Limit treats.** Treats should account for no more than 10% of your cat's total daily food intake. Avoid high-calorie varieties. Fool your cat by offering tiny pieces of a treat rather than a whole one. Better yet, replace treat time with calorie-free alternatives such as playing, grooming, and chatting with your cat. These activities also help deepen your bond.

6. **Serve your cat more mini meals.** Help your cat burn more calories by dividing daily portions into two or three smaller meals instead of free feeding. Eating and digestion burn calories.

7. **Provide plenty of water.** Provide your cat with a few bowls of fresh, filtered water around the house. Water helps with digestion and elimination.

8. **Make exercise fun.** Cats won't voluntarily join the gym or hop on the treadmill with you. Put some fun into feline workouts. Tap into your cat's predatory nature with toys that trigger them to chase, leap and pounce. All these actions build muscle tone and reduce fat.

Find the toy or game your cat loves the best. Some cats prefer quiet toys, such as chasing the beams of a penlight against a darkened wall. Some like toys that make noise when they pounce on them. Others go gaga for fishing pole types of toys. Aim for mini workouts lasting 5 minutes or more at a time.

One client found her cat enjoys being fitted with a harness and taken for half-hour walks around her backyard.

9. **Sneak in some calorie-burning activities.** Locate the food bowl at the top or bottom of the stairs to create a mini aerobic workout for your cat. One client places her cat's food bowl in the basement of her 3 story home. This way the cat must do at least 100 steps a day.

These days, when Shannon Harris arrives home after a full day of teaching aerobics or other fitness classes, her now-trim Mugsy stands ready for a friendly game of tag, laser-pointer chase or snagging a toy mouse in midair.

"I've realized that I've given the best gift I could give Mugsy – a healthier life," Harris says. "I look forward to many healthy years with him."

If you have any questions concerning your cat's weight, contact Flanary Veterinary Clinic at (270) 898-9738.
www.flanaryvet.com