

Helping Older Cats Live Healthier & Longer Lives

Cats are the second most popular pet in the United States, with approximately 96 million cats living with families in 2017. There are 90 million pet dogs, and surprisingly the most popular pet is freshwater fish, with nearly 140 million taking up residence in household tanks in the United States this year. Since I am not trained to take care of fish, I want to focus on cats and what we can do as they age to help them live healthier, happier and longer lives.

The #1 thing we can do for our cats is not to overfeed them. Contrary to the old saying, being a fat cat is not a good thing and unfortunately, 59 percent of pet cats in this country are overweight with 31 percent qualifying as obese. This is hard on feline bodies as it affects their bones and joints, as well as their internal organs, including their hearts. Obesity also can lead to an increase in cancer and cardiac disease, which are the top two causes of death in cats, as well as dogs and people. It is also the easiest to control, since our cats can only eat what we give them and, therefore, portion control is up to the pet owner.

Just like people, there are some cats that are prone to weight gain no matter what they eat, but veterinarians have special diets and treats to help those kitties as well. I have seen significant weight loss in cats whose owners fed them the correct food, and in the proper amounts. The quality of life of those cats improved tremendously as did their interactions with their owners and other pets in the house. They were noticeably happier and will live longer.

Obese cats are also at a high risk for diabetes, which is one of the top three diseases that affect cats as they age. The other two diseases that often affect felines in their senior years are hyperthyroidism and kidney failure. All three diseases can cause weight loss, so if your older cat is suddenly losing weight, it is very important that you see your veterinarian immediately. Diabetes can cause an increase on thirst and more frequent urination (and trips to the litterbox), which are two critical symptoms that also require a veterinary visit right away.

Kidney disease occurs in cats as they age, because cats require a high amount of protein in their diet, and protein is hard on the kidneys. Feeding a high quality cat food can make a huge difference in the lifespan of a cat. If older cats are losing weight or stop eating because of failing kidneys, we can treat to improve the kidneys and get their appetites back as long as they aren't too far gone. Once we get them feeling well enough to eat, there are also special veterinary diets that can improve kidney function and add years to the life of an affected cat. I am a big fan of being proactive and putting cats on a renal diet sometime between the ages of 7 to 9 years. This way, I feel that I am prolonging the time before the kidneys start to age, and therefore adding years to the cat's life.

Hyperthyroidism is another disease that will eventually affect almost all cats if they live long enough. It is a factor of old age in cats, and with the advances in medical care and high quality nutrition, more and more cats are living to a ripe old age, and we are seeing lots of cats with overactive thyroid problems. Although weight loss is again, the most common symptom you will notice with this disease, they continue to eat and in many cases eat ravenously, and yet they continue to lose weight.

Untreated, it can lead to cardiac issues and other organ problems and eventually death. Luckily, we can easily control this condition, keeping cats comfortable and happy while extending their lives.

I have stressed that you should take your older cat to a veterinarian if you see weight loss or any other symptoms; however, the best thing you can do is to have regular veterinary check-ups (at least once a year) and after the age of 7, have the veterinarian do some bloodwork each year. A senior wellness profile can reveal issues and allow the veterinarian to take action before it becomes a problem that threatens the life and well-being of your senior cat. That alone can lead to a healthier and longer life for the older cat with whom you share your life.