

Weight Loss in Older Cats Can Be Serious!

All around the country for the past 10 years, there has been a noticeable decline in cat visits to the veterinarian. This likely started during the recession for monetary reasons, and it may have persisted because cats seem to be fairly low-maintenance pets. However, the primary reason for annual examinations by a veterinarian is to prevent health issues by catching problems early, as well as educating pet owners about how to best prevent problems, keep cats healthier and give them every opportunity to live longer lives.

This is especially important in older cats who may be losing weight. Cat owners may not realize their cats are gradually losing weight until the weight loss is significant, but the veterinarian weighs the cat on each visit and can notice if there is a trend. If, for example, a ten-pound cat loses two pounds, that is 20 percent of his or her body weight, which is not only excessive, but also likely to be indicative of a health problem. Losing muscle mass or having a rapid decrease in body weight is probably not as simple as having an intestinal parasite or worms, although your veterinarian will check to rule that out.

There are, in fact, three very common causes of dramatic weight loss in senior feline citizens- diabetes, hyperthyroidism and kidney failure. Weight loss also can signal something even more serious, like cancer. Diabetes will lead a cat to drink a lot of water and, consequently, go to the litter box more frequently. The cat will also lose weight gradually, but steadily. Fortunately, we can treat for diabetes with insulin and a special diet. If caught early, the cat can live a normal and lengthy life. However,

just like in people, the longer the disease goes untreated, the more serious the complications can become.

Hyperthyroidism and kidney failure are very common in older cats and will probably happen in every cat if he or she lives long enough. A cat with hyperthyroidism will often have a great appetite, but still be losing weight and muscle mass. There is a simple blood test to diagnose the problem and many different ways to control it. The treatments range from something as simple as a special diet to pills, creams and even radiation therapy in some cases. Veterinary researchers have made this condition simple to treat, because hyperthyroidism is such a common problem. The goal is to control the condition in a manner that is quick and easy to comply with for the cat owner.

Kidney failure is similarly easy to treat, especially if diagnosed early on. Veterinarians will often recommend a yearly senior wellness blood test to catch this disease in its early stages. At that point, it also is readily controlled by something as simple as feeding a special diet. That one small act can add years to a cat's life. As kidney disease progresses to later stages, the cat may stop eating, which makes it very difficult to treat. Catching the weight loss and other symptoms early on makes a huge difference in successful outcomes.

If an older cat is losing weight and blood tests do not reveal any one of the three conditions I have discussed, your veterinarian will begin looking for other causes the weight loss, including cancer, which could be a possibility. Even then, early diagnosis often can lead to a positive outcome. The bottom line is that annual examinations are the best thing for your cat, but if you notice weight loss at any time, please take your feline friend to the veterinarian

without delay. A good examination followed by whatever tests the veterinarian feels are necessary will lead to a diagnosis. Proper treatment at that point can insure many more years of companionship and love from your feline family member.