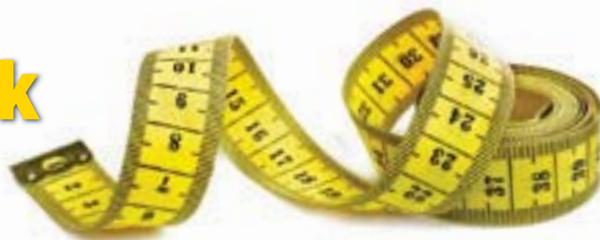




JUNK in the Trunk

Help your fat cat dump his spare tire

by ARNA COHEN



Otto has been on a long journey, and he's lost some baggage along the way. That's not something most travelers would celebrate, but for Otto (named for his ottoman-like physique), it's meant the difference between life as a furry footstool and life as a cat.

The 10-year-old shorthair tipped the scales at 34 pounds when his owner brought him to New Jersey's Clementon Animal Hospital in January 2011. "We just stared at him," says veterinarian Sachina Lyons-Brown. "... It was so weird to see a cat his size."

The equivalent of a 500-pound man, Otto could barely walk, couldn't groom himself, and couldn't negotiate a litter box. His owners had decided to euthanize him. Instead, Lyons-Brown and her staff adopted

the sweet-natured, beach-ball-sized feline. Efforts to lighten his load began that day.

FAT CAT NATION

While Otto's morbid obesity is unusual, he has plenty of company in the plus-sized feline department. A 2011 nationwide survey found that 55 percent of pet cats—or 47.3 million—are overweight, and about a quarter of those are classified as obese (8 or higher on a 9-point body condition scoring chart).

Why are cats getting fat? In a word, lifestyle.

In their mice-eating days of old, domestic cats "had to work really hard for that one little boost of calories," says Lyons-Brown. Today's modern housecat, on the other hand, spends most of his day looking

for something to do, and too often that becomes parking himself in front of an overly generous kibble bowl. Owners often compound the problem by interpreting their kitty's requests for attention as demands for food and showering him with treats, when what he really needs is a good workout.

The consequences can be serious. Even a few extra pounds can burden the heart, raise blood pressure, and cause arthritis by increasing stress on the joints and ligaments. Obese cats, unable to clean themselves properly, frequently suffer from painful rashes and urinary tract infections. And overweight cats are four times more likely to develop diabetes.

Yet too many owners ignore their kitties' increasing girth. Some think a pudgy cat is



BIGGEST LOSER, FELINE-STYLE

Your cat didn't pack on the pounds all by himself—he had your help! And now he needs your help to take off the weight. Follow these guidelines to get your fat feline back to fit and fabulous.

VET? CHECK! Ask your veterinarian to create a safe program based on your cat's energy needs and ideal weight for his size—8 to 10 pounds for most cats, or 11 to 14 for those with large frames. To avoid fatty liver disease and other health problems, make sure your cat is eating enough for a slow weight loss of no more than 3 to 4 ounces a week.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER. Spread your cat's calorie allotment among three or four small meals to keep his metabolism and energy level up. Serve the last meal at bedtime so he won't wake you begging for a midnight snack.

A TRUCE ON TREATS. Instead of giving a treat every time your cat meows at you, give him some playtime, a brushing session, or simply a few pets. If you can't resist providing the occasional treat, make your cat work for it: Toss the morsel across the room or put it in a dispensing toy that he has to bat around.

PURRSONAL TRAINER. Set aside time every day to get your kitty off the couch and moving around. He'll become more active as his weight drops. Find exercise tips and other feline weight loss tools at catinfo.org and petobesityprevention.org.

▲ **GET YOUR CAT MOVING** with leash training, indoor walkways, and a variety of toys—and view more photos of a slimmed-down Otto—at humansociety.org/allanimals.

cute. Others, like Green Bay, Wis., resident Heather Stuebs, simply don't know what a normal size cat should look like. Nine-year-old Teebo, who topped 21 pounds, was "just a large cat" in her mind. The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention dubs this the "fat pet gap"—the illusion of



When he first arrived at Clementon Animal Hospital in New Jersey, Otto resembled a piece of furniture, weighing in at 34 pounds.

pet owners that their portly companion is a healthy size.

For Stuebs, the reality check came during a routine veterinary visit in February: All three of her cats were seriously overweight. "We didn't monitor the food intake. ... We gave them too many treats and didn't play with them as much as we should have," Stuebs says.

The realization that she was putting her beloved pets' health at risk brought changes to the Stuebs' household. Teebo, Rose, and Callie went on a diet.

THE CATKINS DIET

Everyone knows someone who lost 10 pounds in 10 days on a juice fast or cabbage soup diet. But in feline shrinkage, there are no quick fixes. Cats who reduce too quickly

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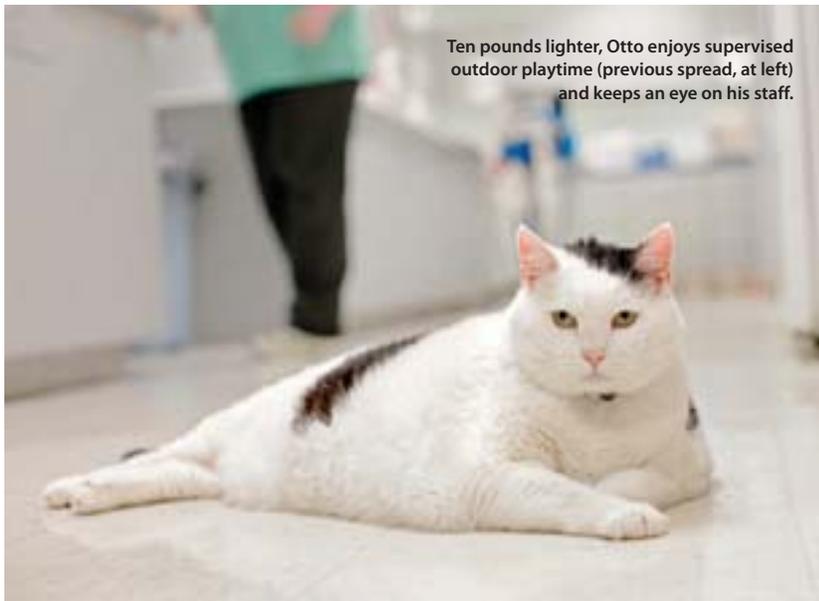
Ellen DeGeneres, animal advocate, co-owner, Halo

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Ten pounds lighter, Otto enjoys supervised outdoor playtime (previous spread, at left) and keeps an eye on his staff.

can develop life-threatening hepatic lipidosis (fatty liver disease), so weight loss must be carefully monitored. Done correctly, it can take more than a year for a real heavyweight to reach his goal.

Successful weight loss starts with calorie control. “When humans measure out dry food for a cat, their eyes are bigger than reality,” says veterinarian Lisa Pierson, who maintains the website *catinfo.org*. “They don’t understand that a half cup can be over 300 calories. Most sedentary housecats only need about 200 to 225 calories a day.”

Cats who eat only kibble, high in calories and carbs, should be switched to high-protein, low-carb canned food, says Pierson; studies have shown that such diets are better at meeting feline nutritional needs and keeping weight under control. “Cats are programmed to eat a certain amount of protein. If ... you’re feeding them very high carbohydrate diets, they tend to overeat because they’re trying to meet their protein needs,” Pierson explains. The increased water content in canned food also means cats are satiated sooner, even though they’re taking in fewer calories per bite.

For Stuebs’ cats, the bottomless food dish and endless treats were replaced with carefully measured meals and fun toys that motivate her kitties to move. The extra

attention and playtime have helped her trio adapt to the new regimen, Stuebs says.

For Lyons-Brown and her staff, getting Otto to exercise was a challenge. When he first arrived at the vet clinic, the morbidly obese kitty couldn’t walk on his toes like a normal cat, says Lyons-Brown. “His legs were down; all the way up to his ankles would be touching the ground.” Not surprisingly, he tended to stay put in one spot.

At first, staff got him moving by placing him a few feet from his food so he would have to walk to it. “It was a rule that everyone who was here had to move him three times during their day,” Lyons-Brown says. As his weight gradually dropped, Otto became interested in playing with toys and other animals in the clinic.

Otto’s odyssey isn’t over. He has more weight to shed. But a year later and more than 10 pounds lighter, the former footstool sits normally, grooms himself, uses a regular litter box, climbs stairs, and trots around the office. In other words, he’s a cat.

55% of pet cats are overweight

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