

## KINsights

### THE AGING FELINE - IS MY CAT FIT OR FRAIL?

#### KEY POINTS

- Frailty refers to an age-related decline in body system function or reserve
- Proper nutrition is vital to supporting your cat's health
- Cats have unique nutritional requirements especially as they become older
- Cats experience changes in digestion & metabolism as they become older
- Cats may lose fat, muscle, or both as they become older
- Recognition of the difference between fat and muscle loss is important
- A variety of diseases can result in unintended weight loss in cats
- Signs of illness may not be obvious in early stages
- There are ways you can get involved in your cat's health
- It's a team effort between you and your veterinarian

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#### HOW OLD IS MY CAT ANYWAY?

Although we expect our cats to get older, it can be difficult to know how that number relates to physical maturity and health. Rough guidelines for life stage classification in cats do exist. From birth to six months of age is the kitten stage. After six months cats transition from teenagehood to maturity and are considered to be in their prime between three and six years of age. Full maturity ranges from seven to ten years, and over ten years is considered the senior stage. Cats over the age of fourteen are considered geriatric. To put this in perspective, a cat reaches geriatric status at the human equivalent of about 76 years of age.<sup>1</sup>

#### WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

As with us, maintenance of a healthy body weight and good nutritional intake are vital for the wellbeing of our feline family members as they mature and become older. Cats have unique nutritional requirements which make them particularly intolerant to even brief periods of inadequate nutrition.<sup>2</sup> Cats experience age-related changes in digestion and metabolism as they

transition through their life stages, from kittens to seniors.<sup>3</sup> Being aware of these changing nutritional needs is an important aspect of feline care. Malnutrition has been linked to many negative effects on pet health including suppression of the immune system and prolonged recovery from illness.<sup>2,4</sup> Monitoring nutritional status is so important that the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) has developed a global initiative to encourage routine nutritional assessment of small animal patients at every veterinary visit.<sup>5</sup>

## IT TAKES MORE THAN A SCALE

As cats age they may lose muscle, fat, or both; all of which contribute to overall weight loss. Recognizing change in elderly cats can be challenging and requires more than monitoring a number on the scale. Individual assessment of each of these components (collectively referred to as body composition) is important. Early recognition of subtle changes may suggest a change in cat health. Initially, loss of fat or muscle may not be clear to cat owners. Loss may be occurring even if the cat is not sick or showing obvious signs of illness making recognition difficult. It can be particularly challenging to detect loss of muscle in overweight or obese cats, as excess fat can mask muscle loss and result in delayed recognition.<sup>6</sup>

Loss of fat will lead to a general reduction in body condition, also known as the body condition score or “BCS”. The BCS is a score assigned to the pet during physical examination by a veterinarian, based on the amount of fat covering specific areas of the body. Using a 9-point scale, a BCS of 4-5 out of 9 is considered optimal with less than 4 being underweight and more than 5 being overweight.<sup>5</sup> A cat with an optimal BCS will have a somewhat noticeable waist line behind the ribs and a slight fatty layering over the ribs on both sides. Assessment of muscle mass involves feeling the muscles along the spine, head, and shoulders. Muscle mass is either determined to be normal, or to exhibit mild, moderate, or severe loss.<sup>5</sup> This type of assessment is also known as Muscle Condition Scoring or “MCS”.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, recording body weight with an accurate and reliable scale is an essential part of body composition assessment. Monitoring body composition is a team effort, which starts at home and continues with the veterinary team during routine visits.

## WHY DO CATS LOSE WEIGHT?

There are a variety of reasons why a cat may lose weight. Sarcopenia is a term used to describe age associated loss of muscle mass, which can occur in absence of disease.<sup>7</sup> When disease is present leading to loss of muscle and fat the term cachexia is used.<sup>7</sup> It's important to note that weight loss is a clinical sign of underlying disease and not a disease itself. There are a variety of diseases that may result in weight loss, particularly in the aging cat.<sup>8</sup> Disorders of the thyroid gland or diabetes may be more commonly diagnosed in our aging feline population and can contribute to weight loss. Underlying disease of the kidneys, gastrointestinal tract, pancreas, or liver can also lead to weight loss and the possibility of cancer should also be considered.<sup>7</sup>

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

When weight loss is suspected it's important to consult with a veterinarian. The veterinary visit will provide an opportunity to share information pertaining to an individual cats' diet and eating habits, as well as any changes that may have been noted at home. After the physical exam, the veterinarian will

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make recommendations on the best care plan for the cat. These recommendations may include some initial medical therapies and a diagnostic evaluation. Diagnostic tests may include blood and urine tests as well as imaging such as x-ray or ultrasound. Depending on the diagnosis, the veterinarian may make additions, adjustments, or changes to current medications or therapies. The cats' diet may also be assessed to ensure adequacy in meeting the cat's current needs. Progression of an already known disease could be responsible even if the cat was previously stable. It is equally important to note that more than one disease may be present. Depending on the diagnosis, response to therapy, and prognosis the veterinarian may also offer referral to a veterinary specialist for additional evaluation.

## SUMMARY

Early recognition of a change in body composition is an important part of aging cat care. Weight loss can occur in the presence or absence of underlying disease and may result in loss of fat, muscle, or both.<sup>7</sup> Working with a veterinarian to determine the underlying cause of weight loss is an important first step in moving forward with a care plan. Early recognition of weight loss and diagnosis of underlying disease may lead to improved outcomes and quality of life for our aging feline friends.

## References

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