

October 2011: Multiple Possible Causes of Weight Loss in Older Cats

Dear Doctor: We have an eleven-year-old cat that is losing weight, but eating. He seems like he is acting normally. He has not been to a vet in years. Do you have any ideas what may be causing the weight loss?

Signed,

Patty in Plover

We can start by thinking of what causes weight loss, such as a decrease in the amount of calories consumed, inadequate digestion or absorption of nutrients, or altered metabolism. In some cases, nutrients are lost from the body through the kidneys or intestines. So what causes these changes? The causes can be numerous, and will vary by age and species of animal. If your boy is otherwise feeling well and eating well, Diabetes Mellitus or Hyperthyroid Disease should be considered as possible causes of weight loss for a cat of his age.

However, it is important to be certain that your cat is actually eating the appropriate amount of food each day, which requires measuring the food given at each meal. If food is constantly available, you may not notice subtle changes in the amount consumed. Decreases in appetite may be caused by nausea, which can be associated with problems such as kidney disease, pancreatitis, inflammatory bowel disease, or even cancer. In many cases, vomiting is often reported with these conditions. We can also see a decreased desire to eat if a pet has dental disease, such as loose or infected teeth, broken teeth or inflammation of the gums. The pet wants to eat, but it causes discomfort, so the pet is reluctant to continue eating.

Another area to monitor is the litter box. It may be difficult to notice the difference between urine and watery diarrhea with some of the types of litters. And if you have more than one cat, you may still see normal bowel movements even though diarrhea is also present. With chronic diarrhea, even if it is soft with some form, it is possible to lose significant nutrients. Again, inflammatory bowel disease, cancer or even intestinal parasites may be the cause. It could also be a sign that the digestive gland (the pancreas) is not working properly to release enzymes to help digest the food.

As you can see, there are many possible causes for weight loss. If you can be certain your cat is being fed the appropriate amount of food daily, then further investigation is warranted. A visit to your veterinarian should include detailed questions regarding your cat's history and symptoms, along with a thorough physical examination. Testing options will be discussed with you, and questions regarding potential treatments will be addressed. Many of the causes of weight loss can be successfully managed once there is a proper diagnosis. Best wishes to find the specific answer to your concerns for your boy.