

# Cat Nutrition

## Maintaining a healthy weight for emotional wellness

We humans know how our weight affects not only our physical health but also our mental health and emotional wellbeing. And it's no different for cats. Being overweight or underweight will significantly affect how a cat feels, as well as how they look, behave, and how active and physically healthy they are.





## Obesity – a growing problem

Obesity is the most common nutritional disorder seen in cats today. Recently, it has been estimated that over 50% of cats in the U.S exceed their ideal weight.<sup>1</sup> Cats are defined as overweight if their body weight is 10-20% above ideal and obese if more than 20% above their ideal weight.<sup>2</sup>

Obesity in cats is associated with several health and welfare risks including: arthritis, breathing problems, heart disease, diabetes, urinary tract disease, and certain types of cancer. Obese cats may also have shortened life spans and reduced quality of life. Being overweight can even restrict normal grooming behaviours, as well as the ability to exercise, play or explore their environment. Pain and discomfort from associated health conditions can also negatively influence behaviour and affect how a cat interacts with other cats and people. Over time, this can lead to reduced or negative socialisation experiences and inadequate mental stimulation which in turn will negatively impact your cat's emotional wellbeing (see [Health](#)).

<sup>1</sup>Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, 2019, 2018 Pet Obesity Survey Results: U.S. Pet Obesity Rates Plateau and Nutritional Confusion Grows, Available at: <https://petobesityprevention.org/2018>, Accessed 12 January 2021

<sup>2</sup>Williams, K, & Downing, R, Obesity in Cats, Available at: <https://vcahospitals.com/know-your-pet/obesity-in-cats>, Accessed 07 February 2022







**More information, including a video demonstrating how to body condition score your cat, can be found [here](#)**

## Maintaining a healthy weight

Calorie control and appropriate exercise are the most important factors influencing the maintenance of a healthy body weight. However, it's not always easy to recognise that your cat is overweight. Healthy weight can vary greatly, even between individuals of the same breed, and it's important to understand what a healthy bodyweight looks like for your cat. A simple method to determine if your cat is at a healthy weight is by checking their body condition score. This requires a quick visual assessment of your cat to determine where they fit on a scale from extremely underweight to obese.

A cat with a healthy body condition score will have a visible waist and you should be able to feel their ribs easily without applying pressure. When you have identified that your cat is at a healthy body condition score, their current weight can then be used to help monitor and maintain a healthy bodyweight.



## Benefits of wet and dry food

There is evidence that feeding cats a diet with a higher moisture content (e.g., tinned or wet food) can help reduce the risk of weight gain. A recent study demonstrated that cats fed a diet with a high moisture content gained less weight, per calorie consumed, compared with cats fed the same diet with a lower water content. This effect was attributed to an increase in the cats' voluntary physical activity.<sup>3</sup> This doesn't mean that every cat should be fed wet food exclusively, as there are benefits of dry food, such as improved dental health,<sup>4</sup> and many cats will have individual preferences in the type and texture of food they prefer (see [Individuality](#)).



<sup>3</sup>Cameron, KM, Morris, PJ, Hackett, RM, et al., 2011, The effects of increasing water content to reduce the energy density of the diet on body mass changes following caloric restriction in domestic cats. *Journal of Animal Physiology and Animal Nutrition*, Vol 95, pp. 399-408

<sup>4</sup>Mata, F, 2015, The Choice of Diet Affects the Oral Health of the Domestic Cat, *Animals*, Vol 5(1), pp. 101-109



## Reading the signs

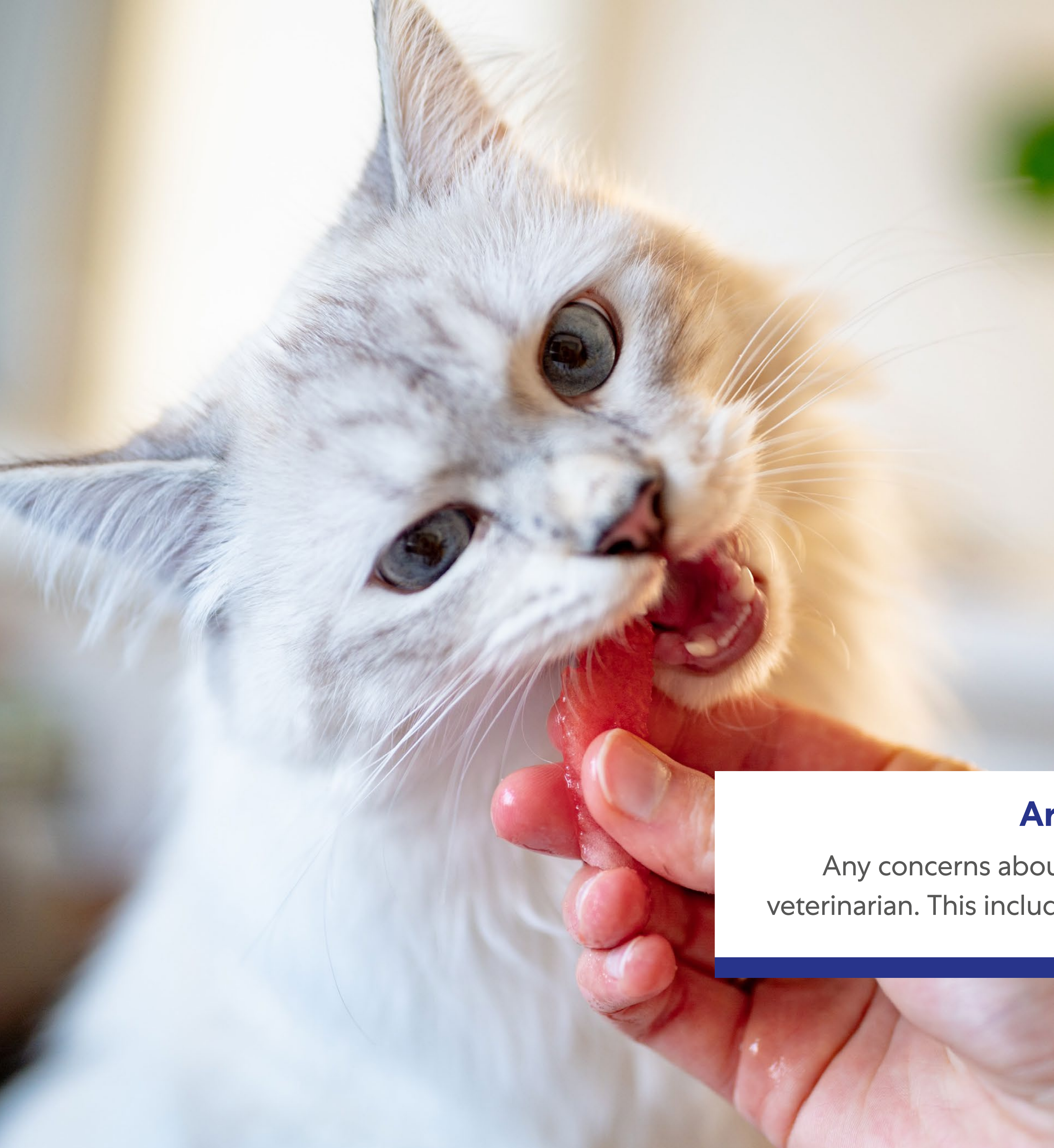
It's also worth understanding that feeding is not a social activity in cats. Many owners incorrectly assume that when their cat makes affectionate contact at mealtimes, that the behaviour is driven by hunger and 'begging'. Whilst this is usually not the case initially, crafty cats will rapidly learn that affectionate behaviour will elicit a food reward from their owner, which may contribute to weight gain<sup>5,6</sup>.



<sup>5</sup>German, A, & Butterwick, R, 2012, WALTHAM® pocket book of healthy weight maintenance for cats and dogs, 2nd edition, WALTHAM® Centre for Pet Nutrition: Leicestershire, p. 6

<sup>6</sup>Herron, ME, Horowitz, DF,& Siracusa, C, 2020, Decoding Your Cat: The ultimate experts explain common cat behaviors and reveal how prevent or change unwanted ones, 1stEdition, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: New York





## Balancing your lifestyles

Feeding home-prepared diets or table scraps have also been linked to an increased risk of obesity. This may be partly because there is no feeding guide to follow to ensure the correct amount is being fed. Your lifestyle as a cat owner also plays an important role, with a general lack of physical activity in the household being a common factor associated with an overweight pet.<sup>7</sup>

Regular body condition scoring, weight checks, exercise, and appropriate quantity and quality of nutrition are key to maintaining a healthy bodyweight. [More tips can be found in this article.](#)

### Are you unhappy with your cat's weight?

Any concerns about a pet's body weight or condition should be discussed with your veterinarian. This includes weight loss plans as these will often require carefully tailored diets.

<sup>7</sup>PMFA, 2009, Pet Obesity: The reality in 2009, Available at: [https://www.pfma.org.uk/\\_assets/docs/White%20Papers/PFMA\\_WhitePaper%20Final.pdf](https://www.pfma.org.uk/_assets/docs/White%20Papers/PFMA_WhitePaper%20Final.pdf), Accessed 30 December 2021



## Tailoring diet to your cat's individual needs

It's important to consider your cat's unique needs when choosing a diet. Younger or more active outdoor cats will require more energy from their food than senior cats or those that lead a more sedentary indoor lifestyle. Inadequate energy intake will be detrimental to your cat's overall health, ultimately leading to weight loss. On the other hand, excess energy intake will cause weight gain, leading to obesity and compromised health.

Other factors, such as neuter status will also affect dietary needs. While it's not true that neutering makes cats fat, [neutered cats](#) do need fewer calories. To find out more about the importance of portion control in maintaining a healthy bodyweight in neutered cats, [see this article](#). Without the right diet, your cat may not only become physically ill, but will live a less-satisfying, lower-quality life overall. And because your cat's needs change during their lifetime, so too must their diet change to maximize wellbeing.







### **Signs that your cat's diet may need reassessing include:<sup>8</sup>**

- Progression to the next life stage e.g. from adult to senior
- Change in lifestyle e.g. more or less active
- Neuter status-Pregnancy or lactation
- Change in weight
- Lack of energy
- Change in demeanour or behaviour
- Change in toileting habits or poor stool quality
- Poor coat or change in texture/volume
- Change in feeding habits or preferences
- Signs of illness (like frequent vomiting or hairballs) or discomfort

**To learn more about meeting your cat's unique needs to optimise emotional wellbeing, see [Individuality](#).**

<sup>8</sup>WSAVA, 2011, Nutritional Assessment Guidelines, Journal of the South African Veterinary Association, Vol 82(4), Available at: <https://ws-ava.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/WSAVA-Nutrition-Assessment-Guidelines-2011-JSAP.pdf>, Accessed 04 February 2022





## What is the right feeding routine for your cat?

In many cases, our cat's feeding routine is built around convenience and the ability to fit in with our own busy lifestyles. While this isn't necessarily a bad thing, it's important to be aware of the impact our imposed feeding routines may have on your cat's physical and emotional health.

For example, up to 50% of a cat's day would be spent acquiring and eating food if they were free-ranging in nature. In ten minutes or less, your cat will probably finish their meal from a bowl, which takes less than 1% of that time. But by providing your cat with enriched feeding opportunities that allow them to express hunting-type behaviours, you can help improve their emotional wellbeing by providing a valuable source of mental stimulation.<sup>6</sup>

**To learn more about your cat's natural hunting behaviour, [follow this link.](#)**

<sup>6</sup>Herron, ME, Horowitz, DF,& Siracusa, C, 2020, Decoding Your Cat: The ultimate experts explain common cat behaviors and reveal how prevent or change unwanted ones, 1stEdition, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: New York





**Splitting your cat's daily food intake into several small meals per day helps to replicate your cat's natural feeding preferences, whilst maintaining a healthy weight**

## Cat feeding behaviour

Cats are motivated to hunt even when they aren't hungry, demonstrating a biological need for this activity, which is not necessarily based on calorie-seeking.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to mealtimes, it's extremely important that your cat feels safe and secure when eating. Studies have also suggested that scheduled mealtimes may make cats more aggressive and less cooperative compared to free-feeding (ad libitum) but may increase the risk of obesity in certain individuals. In this situation, aggressive behaviour is most likely caused by frustration, but may be managed by feeding your cat in a way that feels more natural to them. A recent study found providing meals from food-dispensing toys reduced the instances of aggression, rough play, and obesity in cats.<sup>9</sup> However, the decision to feed at regular mealtimes or offer food ad libitum should also be based on your cat's individual needs and preferences ([see Individuality](#)).

<sup>6</sup>Herron, ME, Horowitz, DF, & Siracusa, C, 2020, Decoding Your Cat: The ultimate experts explain common cat behaviors and reveal how prevent or change unwanted ones, 1st Edition, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: New York

<sup>9</sup>Delgado, M, & Dantas, LMS, 2020, Feeding Cats For Optimal Mental and Behavioral Well-Being, The Veterinary Clinics of North America. Small Animal Practice, Vol 50(5), pp. 939-953



## Food as enrichment

You can use food to incorporate many types of enrichment, such as sensory experiences and cognitive stimulation. For instance, varying your cat's food is an excellent way to provide enrichment, as there are plenty of food-associated variables such as the food's formulation (wet or dry), the food's properties (taste, smell, [temperature](#) and texture) as well as how it is presented or delivered. In addition, any modification to your cat's environment that encourages physical activity and the expression of natural behaviours (such as hunting) is considered enrichment. These activities are crucial to your cat's mental and emotional wellbeing.

**How you  
feed your cat  
matters, as well  
as what you  
feed and when**

### Why do enrichment feeding?

Enriched feeding provides mental stimulation and a sense of satisfaction when the food is found. By encouraging your cat to hunt or forage for their food, you're tapping into their 'wild side' and allowing them to express their natural behaviour which is key for optimal emotional wellbeing ([see Environment](#)).



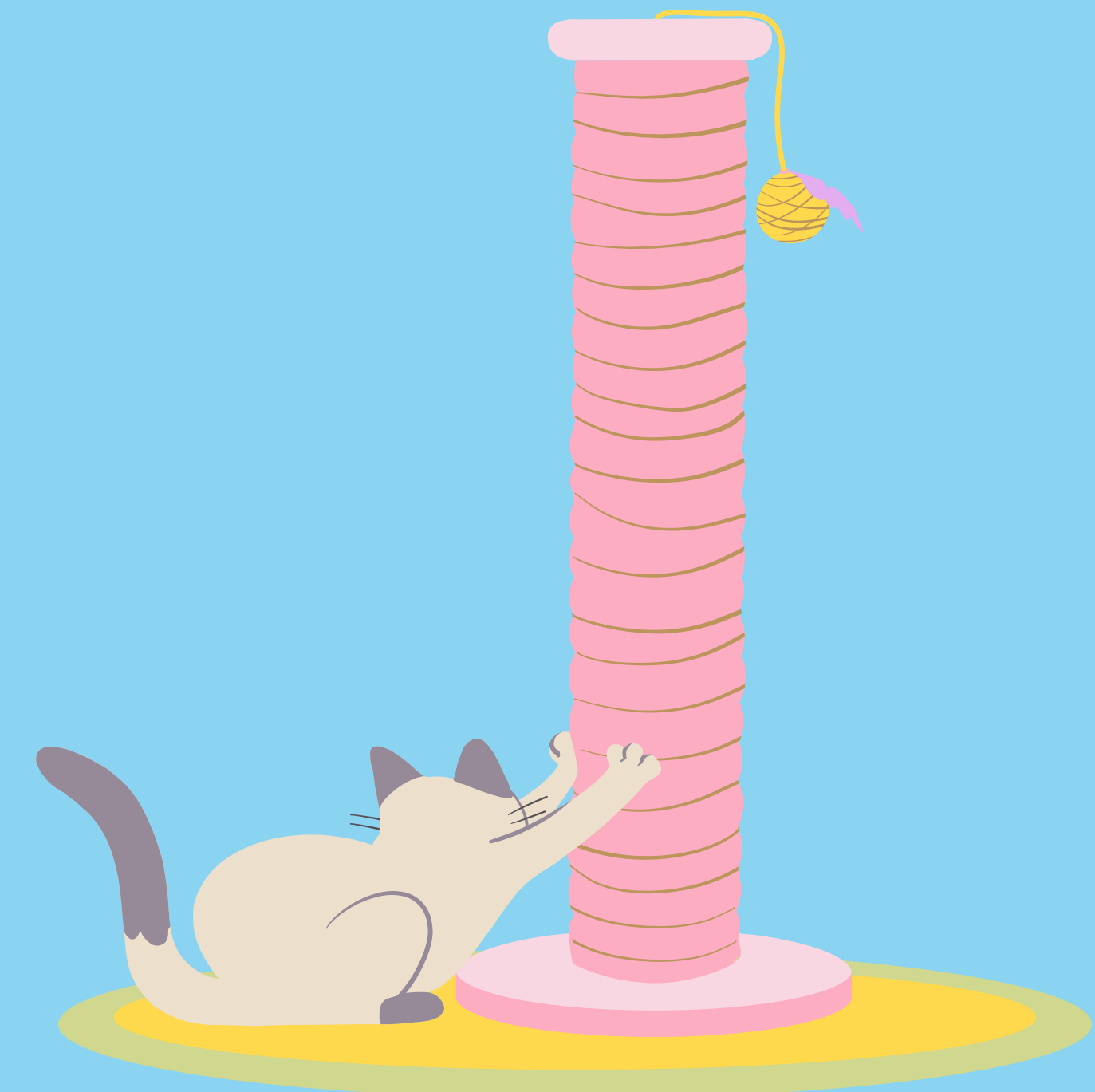




## Encourage their hunting instinct

Allowing your cat to express natural hunting instincts can also help prolong mealtimes and encourage physical exercise at the same time, which can be beneficial for weight management.

Consider encouraging your cat to eat their meals via enriched feeding methods, rather than from a traditional cat bowl where possible (exceptions may include cats with health conditions, such as arthritis or diabetes).







**For more creative inspiration and information about the use of food puzzles for cats, [follow this link](#)**

## Food puzzles and other creative inspiration

Puzzle toys that your cat must manipulate to gain access to their food are another excellent way to prolong meals and provide mental stimulation. There are different types of food puzzles that can be used for cats, including stationary puzzles and those that roll or wobble, like the Snacky Mouse. Make your own and hide food around the home in items like empty cardboard toilet paper rolls or tissue boxes. Some cats may need encouragement to start using food-dispensing toys or enriched feeding methods. You can begin by putting a few of their favourite treats inside, and around the toy to spark their interest. You may need to demonstrate how the toy works by rolling or moving it so that your cat gets the idea.

It may be necessary to try several different types of food dispensing toys before finding one that suits your cat best (see [Individuality](#)). Over time, as they get more proficient you can increase the difficulty in how treats are removed. Remember, that you don't want to frustrate your cat by providing enrichment that is too challenging. If your cat goes for more than a day or two without eating, it can be very dangerous, so when you introduce a new toy, make sure your cat is able to get enough food from it or that you provide additional meals.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Herron, ME, Horowitz, DF,& Siracusa, C, 2020, Decoding Your Cat: The ultimate experts explain common cat behaviors and reveal how prevent or change unwanted ones, 1stEdition, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: New York




## Cats chew too

Cats like to chew on things, especially if they eat mostly soft foods. By providing acceptable options for chewing, like cat grass, you're allowing your cat to express this natural behaviour without resorting to potentially toxic houseplants or other hazardous items.

Chewable cat treats may also deliver the additional benefit of supporting your cat's oral health. [Dentabites®](#), for instance, are clinically proven to reduce plaque and tartar build-up. It's important, however, to always choose dental chews that are safe for cats. More information on how to keep your cat's teeth healthy can be found [here](#).

For more information on types of enrichment see [Health](#) and [Environment](#).



**Chewing is an important natural feline behaviour, so providing foods that promote chewing can serve as enrichment**

Learn more about nutrition and emotional wellbeing for your pets at [shine.waltham.com](https://shine.waltham.com)