

Food, food, food!!! - Under-eaters? Over-eaters? Why it is never just about appetite

There is a huge amount of research looking into risk factors for obesity in the domestic feline at the moment, it is indeed a growing concern. In my line of work it is not just those cats who eat too much that are a concern, but those who do not eat adequately, or those taking on maladaptive eating behaviours, eating inappropriate substances for example.

There is an underlying physiological satisfaction involved with eating behaviour, because in order to stay fit and healthy, eating is important. Exploration of the evolution, domestication and culturalisation of the feline has helped us to understand not only the behavioural aspect of eating behaviour, but also how things can go wrong here.

The Small Hunter

To fully understand eating-related behaviours we need to look further than at nutrition alone. In the cats' case, we need to take a holistic approach, exploring the complex sequence of events leading up to normal eating behaviours.

Research has shown that even the well fed house cats may typically spend up to a quarter of each day hunting¹, patrolling their territory regularly in order to maintain optimal health and well-being.

With their amazing acoustic abilities, along with instinctual responses to higher-pitched sounds, the cat locates its prey instantly². Once her attention has been focussed, the cat slinks rapidly towards the suspect, dropping to the ground as she draws closer. When near enough, a short sprint, a spring, a strike with the forepaws and she has her victim. Such intricate sequences contribute to the predatory success of the domestic³.

Eating for Satisfaction

Although nutritionally sound, many feed manufacturers overlook this *behavioural* importance of eating. To stay fit and healthy, our cats need to act upon their long evolved instincts, they need to hunt, and they most certainly need to tear and chew upon fleshy meat.

Sinking their teeth and tearing at the flesh of their prey, many internal mechanisms set to work. This process triggers the release of hormones, which in turn causes satisfaction⁴.

Although many "100% natural" foodstuffs can be purchased from many leading supermarkets, considering eating as a behaviour just as much as a nutritional necessity, the texture of these 'melt-in-the-mouth' cutlets or biscuits do not incorporate truly natural eating behaviours.

Other than frustration, hyperactivity, aggression and over-grooming, common problems such as fabric eating, chewing cabling, and sucking are often associated with such eating-related distortions.

Oriental breeds are among the most common breeds in which these conditions are reported. Working with the Feline Advisory Bureau (FAB) Neulle⁵ analysed data obtained from 152 fabric eating domestic cats within the UK, to find that 55% were Siamese, 28% were Burmese, and 11% were crossbreeds.

More general problems include 'fussy eaters' because they or their queens have been used to more natural products, and are then moved to new homes with new routines and different feed management practices.

To avoid these problems, both nutrition with behaviour need to be fully understood. Many experts are now looking into this, bringing natural meaty foods to compliment nutritionally sound diets.

The Fast Food Effect

Further to the afore mentioned difficulties that many owners and breeders come up against, within my day-to-day behavioural consultation work, clients are expressing concerns with the 'addictive' behavioural patterns that their cats' develop when exposed to freeze-dried food treats.

Despite this lack of satisfaction that theoretically these cats should be experiencing, although constituting 100% pure meat, these treat forms are often artificially concentrated with salts or fats or sugars.

Just as we do - a fact that fast-food restaurants have used and become so successful as a result - our cats are increasingly becoming reliant on these concentrated products, behaving in certain ways towards their owners to obtain them, with complex underlying physiological mechanisms involved.

Managing the Indoor Cat – Solutions

The indoor cat will inevitably be restricted in more ways than the cat who is free to roam the neighbourhood, therefore the indoor cat does face a greater risk of developing one or more of the aforementioned disorders the more compromises made correlating with higher risk values.

Understanding more about the natural behaviour of the domestic cat will ensure that an appropriate environment is set up to minimise restriction and stem optimising health and well-being.

1. Dried biscuit based feeds have been linked to disorders such as cystitis, therefore one action to take would be to replace these biscuit based products with chunks of natural meats incorporated into a balanced diet.

I am not a nutritionalist so I would never advise going against veterinary advice, however there are guides to allow the incorporation of meaty chunks as part of a balanced diet safely. Also a gradual "re-introduction" method, to effectively 'wean' these unnatural and often addictive products is advisable.

2. Another measure would be through the use of commonplace cat toys, those that simulate hunting behaviour.

Rather than 'stirring' internal predatory mechanisms, risking frustration with no natural end result (HUNT → EAT/TEAR/CHEW) owners can do one of two things:

- (a) Encourage calmer explorative games, prioritising the mind rather than the body, on the mind rather than then body. Here are a few examples:

Paw & Explore - Place one or two chunks of meat or treat into a wide, short, cardboard tube with both ends open. The cat will need to effectively use his paws to obtain the treat from the tube. Note: the treats must be easily obtainable, gradually increasing in difficulty so as no frustration develops.

The Toy Box - Set-up a tray (e.g. an unused, shallow, litter tray) with an assortment of objects such as pots, toy plastic balls and so on. In amongst these objects, place one or two treats to encourage investigative interaction with humans.

Hide & Seek - Play treasure hunts, similarly to the 'toy box' situation, in and around a blanket within their comfort zone.

- (b) Provide an end result after a fast-paced game, a chunk of cooked chicken breast to tear for example, positively simulate both the hunt and the eating parts of the sequence.

For every indoor cat, I would always suggest lessening compromise, at least by building a run outside to provide some form of natural behaviour. The inclusion of plentiful horizontal scratching mats and

vertical posts, social company (introduced in an appropriate way) and choice are all other strategies that have proven success, replicating natural environments as much as possible.

I hope this provides a good starting point for all. Please feel free to contact me for further advice or recommended reading references, I am always happy to help.

References

- ¹ Turner and Meister (1988) In Bradshaw, J. (1992) *The Behaviour of the Domestic Cat*, CAB International, Bristol, pp. 132
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- ³ Macdonald, D (1992) *The Velvet Claw: A Natural History of Carnivores*, BBC Consumer Publishing, United Kingdom. pp. 10-75
- ⁴ Carlson, N. (1998) *Physiology of Behaviour: Sixth Edition*, Allyn and Bacon, United States. pp. 554-559 and pp. 410-449
- ⁵ Neulle (1991) The Feline Advisory Bureau. In Turner, D. and Bateson, P. (1995) *The Domestic Cat: The Biology of Its Behaviour*. Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom