

I have a 15 year old Siamese cat. He seems to be acting okay but he is getting skinny. I can feel his spine a lot easier than I used to be able to. Does this mean he has a problem?

It's good that you are observant in noticing his weight loss (without having him on a reducing diet) and realizing it may be a sign of illness. Results of an online survey of cat owners published in 2011 found that only 73% of respondents thought the loss of weight in their older pet was a concern that warranted a visit to their veterinarian. Obesity is very common in younger cats, but after the age of 7, the proportion of overweight cats declines, and by age 11 there is a sharp increase in the percentage of cats who are actually underweight. This can be due to the fact that obese middle-aged cats don't live into their teens due to succumbing from other related disease, or for reasons that cause older cats to lose weight.

The number of calories a cat needs to eat drops 3% a year as the cat matures, but by age 11, the calorie requirement begins to increase. In addition, research in older cats shows their ability to digest proteins and fats is reduced. These are two possible simple explanations for your cat's weight loss. If you are feeding a "senior" diet, it may be too low in calories and a change in food may help. If your cat is a picky eater, you may need to feed multiple small meals during the day. Sometimes warming the food helps. Some cats eat better if petted or spoken to while eating. If he has been eating a canned diet, you may need to switch to dry to get more calories into him. Your cat may also not be eating as a result of his sense of taste and smell deteriorating with age.

Aside from these common changes occurring with age there are a multitude of disease processes that can cause weight loss in a cat his age. Any condition that causes pain (e.g. dental disease, arthritis) can result in lowered appetite and weight loss. Cats with other common diseases that result in weight loss such as kidney failure, diabetes and hyperthyroidism generally start losing weight as the first sign of a problem. It may be gradual at first and hard to notice. Your veterinarian will compare your cat's current weight to the one at his prior check-up (should be every 6 months at his age). Your answers to questions regarding any changes in what you are feeding, his appetite, vomiting and bowel habits will help direct your veterinarian to what diagnostic tests are needed and steps to take to get him back to a healthy weight.

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