Could you and your cat enjoy a workout together? Most people see dogs as the most suitable fitness friends, but you and your cat can help each other to keep fit and lose weight too. Dr Nicola Davies reveals all.

Cats need exercise, and they love being active with their favourite people. However, not every cat (or person) has the same fitness levels or exercise interests. So what are the best activities for different cats and different types of people?

Before we investigate all of the fitness facts, we have to ask ourselves if our fur babies are getting a bit (or a lot) too comfortable around the waist. In fact, some people admit to preferring the look of overweight cats to those of a healthy weight, feeling that fat cats are cuddlier and more amusing to watch. Some research has even linked our love of cute cats with their similarity to human babies — and who doesn’t adore a chubby baby face? However, letting your cat become overweight or obese is no laughing matter and poses a health risk that could drastically shorten his life-expectancy.

In 2014, PDSA, the UK’s largest veterinary charity, reported that one in four cats is overweight or obese*, in what it terms a “pet obesity epidemic”. Sarah Carr, veterinary campaigns advisor for PDSA, explains: “Pet obesity continues to be a major concern for veterinary professionals, with 80 per cent of vets seeing an increase in levels of pet obesity over the last two years. Many cat owners seemingly still rely on ‘common sense’ or past experience when deciding how much to feed their cat, but people often overestimate how much food their cat actually needs, which contributes to the pet obesity crisis. Findings from our most recent PDSA Animal Welfare (PAW) Report also show that over 5.5 million pets get treats as part of their daily diet including crisps, cake, leftovers of human food and even takeaways!”

Worryingly, PDSA also expects to see the number of overweight felines increasing. To address this, the charity offers an annual Pet Fit Club, which provides a six-month programme for overweight...
pets, with a vet-tailored diet and exercise regimes. After the programme, a single pet is awarded the title of slimmer of the year.

“The cause of obesity is quite simple,” Sarah continues. “Overweight pets eat more food than they need, so owners have to make a real effort to ensure their pet is getting a suitable, healthy diet. First of all, owners should make an appointment to see their vet to discuss their pet’s problem. It is possible a condition like an underactive thyroid gland may be the cause of the weight increase so it’s important to rule these out first. PDSA’s Pet Fit Club is a fantastic way of getting pets to slim down in our annual competition — visit www.petfitclub.org.uk for details.

“Weight loss should be gradual and a long-term project, but if you are successful you will certainly be helping your pet and increasing his quality of life.”

Despite pet obesity being a life-limiting condition, it seems that many owners are unaware of the gravity of the issue, with 63 per cent of owners feeling that more important problems face their pets, according to research by the Pet Food Manufacturers’ Association (PFMA), who report that “Pet obesity is fast becoming an epidemic.” It reports that 77 per cent of vets say that pet obesity is on the rise and nearly half of all UK household cats are clinically overweight. Figures released by the PFMA indicate that overfeeding is responsible for most feline obesity, but that a lack of exercise is a serious contributing factor.

**Is your cat overweight?**

Rather than looking at the weight of your cat — this can vary from breed to breed — the PFMA recommends that you assess your cat’s body shape using its handy Cat Size-O-Meter (above), as Nicole Paley, communications manager of the PFMA, explains: “The Cat Size-O-Meter is based on the Body Condition Score system used by vets to assess whether a cat is a healthy size. It’s a simple, easy to use chart with step-by-step instructions for checking your cat’s body condition at home. Vets often refer to it as a technical cuddle and cats love it as it encourages you to get hands-on.”

“The areas to gently check are the ribs — these should feel like pens in a soft pencil case, whether you can see a waist indentation, your cat’s belly, and the lower back and hips. If you need help using the chart or have worries about your cat’s weight, why not make the most of the free weight clinics offered by many vets? You can also check out our short video with vet Marc Abraham showing us just how it’s done (visit www.pfma.org.uk/cat-size-o-meter)”

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**Exercise tips**

As well as diet, exercise is very important in helping your cat lose weight, as Sarah explains: “Cats are designed to be active in short bursts, so playing with them is the best way to make sure they get enough exercise. Ideally, cats should be able to go outside in order to exercise and display natural behaviour where it is safe to do so.

“However, if they live on a main road it may be safer to keep them indoors, and just ensure plenty of activities are available. But all cats will benefit from cat toys and activities to help keep them busy — cats who are bored tend to eat more than they should. Getting them a new toy every now and again is a perfect treat, and much better for them than food. There are a few toys that can help entice your cat into activity:

- Things that can be hit: anything light that moves easily across the floor can give your cat a chance to practice hitting and chasing. Rolled-up paper works well. Just make sure that they’re not batting anything they could chew or swallow
- Things that can be chased: a fishing rod-type toy should bring out the predator in even the most sedentary cat
- Things that can be climbed into: empty boxes and tunnels are perfect for this
- Things that can be scratched: scratching stretches and tones the muscles in your cat’s shoulders and back. A scratch post can keep your pet active without your furniture taking the brunt.”

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**Ensure your cat’s keep fit toys are perfect for him.**
A cat/owner workout

So, how can you get into the action, have fun, and get fitter with your cat? Here are seven simple ideas to get you and your cat moving at home:

1. Use a torch
Cats are happy to chase after things that move. You can combine your own exercises with exercises for your cat by holding onto a torch while doing cardio or body weight exercises like crunches. Shine the torch light onto the wall or floor and watch kitty give chase and burn off some calories with you.

2. Attach kitty’s toy to your ‘toys’
If you’re eager to burn fat and build muscle, dumb-bells and kettle balls are great exercise accessories. Attach kitty’s toy to a dumb-bell or kettle ball with a piece of elastic and let him give chase while you pump iron.

3. Toys on a string
Tempt your cat with a toy on a string, starting slowly and increasing the speed until you need to run to stay ahead. Just be alert to what your cat is doing. If his claws are dug into the toy, you won’t want to tear it away for fear of injuring them.

You can also do squats or lunges with a toy on a string dangled in front or to one side of you. It adds a new dimension of fun for you and gives kitty lots of stimulus and plenty of good exercise.

4. The plank challenge
The ‘plank’ (resting on your elbows with your body held in a push-up position) is a brutally effective exercise for stomach muscles. Improve the intensity by balancing on one elbow while using the other arm to pull a cat toy from side to side under your body. Then change sides. Just be sure not to collapse on top of kitty — and always mind those claws.

5. Take a walk
There’s nothing like a brisk walk to get the circulation going and get a bit of fresh air at the same time. Although many cat owners may feel that lead training is similar to trying to teach a cat to bark, most cats take quite well to the lead, as long as owners approach it with the appropriate amount of respect and sensitivity. It’s also much nicer to take a walk with your furry friend, but remember to pay attention to safety first — keep the lead on when outside and be ready to lift your pet out of harm’s way if dogs take an interest.

For tips on training your cat to walk on a harness and lead, visit www.yourcat.co.uk/cat-advice, and don’t miss our buyer’s guide to harnesses and leads in next month’s issue of Your Cat.

6. Cats and yoga
If you want to learn how to do stretching exercises, watching a cat will show you just how they should be done. With this in mind, Homeward Bound, a pet adoption agency in Illinois, sent four cats to a local yoga school to see how they fared in a yoga class.

The cats loved it! Breezy, a cat with a taste for yoga (or at least, those who practice it), settled under one of the students, causing her to hold a pose for much longer than she had originally intended, while other cats settled for yoga tummy rubs with the ‘downward dog’ position and curious nose touches when the crazy humans adopted interesting poses. Be careful though! If you’re wearing drawstring trousers, a new element of play enters the equation, and you may find yourself with quite a challenge!

7. Hide and seek
To engage him, get your cat’s attention and then run and hide around the corner. Very soon an inquisitive moggy will often come trotting along miaowing, ‘I found you!’

This activity can be repeated until one of you gets bored or you run out of time or energy. You may even find your moggy initiating the game by miaowing at you and then running to hide around the corner — darting off when he’s been found.

It is best to tailor your cat’s exercises to his interests and personality or he is likely to ignore all attempts at activity. The cat in your life can enjoy a workout with you and make it a whole lot more fun than it would otherwise have been.

Getting active with your cat is good for both of you and adds a new dimension to the special relationship between you and your feline buddy.