

Feeding Your Cat



Because nutrition is one of the most important keys to your cat's health and longevity, one of your most important responsibilities as a cat owner is to provide your cat with the necessary nutrients required for its growth and maintenance. To do this, it is first necessary to understand what cats need in their diet.

Obligate Carnivores' Nutritional Requirements

Cats are obligate carnivores and are very different from dogs-and people-in their nutritional needs. What does it mean to be an obligate carnivore? It means that cats are strict carnivores that rely on nutrients in animal tissue to meet their specific nutritional requirements. In their natural habitat, cats are hunters that consume prey high in protein with moderate amounts of fat and minimal amounts of carbohydrates. Cats also require more than a dozen nutrients, including vitamins, minerals, fatty acids, and amino acids. These nutrients are the building blocks of various structural body tissues; are essential for chemical reactions (metabolism, catabolism); transport substances into, around, and out of the body; supply energy for growth and maintenance; and provide palatability.

The important thing to remember about nutrients, particularly vitamins and minerals, is that your cat needs the correct amount-but no more. It is possible to have "too much of a good thing" when it comes to vitamins and minerals; the use of supplements not only is unnecessary but also can be potentially dangerous to your pet's health. A key point to remember is that cats are neither small dogs nor people. Because of cats' unique metabolism, what might be good for you might be detrimental to your cat. A high-quality cat food assures an adequate supply of vitamins and minerals in your cat's diet; supplements should never be added without a veterinarian's approval.

Another important nutrient with respect to overall health is water. Water helps regulate body temperature, digest food, eliminate waste, lubricate tissue, and allow salt and other electrolytes to pass through the body. You should provide your cat with clean, fresh water at all times.

What Types of Commercial Cat Food are Available?

Commercial cat foods are formulated as dry, semimoist, and canned. These products differ in water content, protein level, caloric density, palatability, and digestibility. The differences are primarily attributable to the processing methods used by petfood manufacturers.



Dry Food

Dry food contains 6 to 10 percent moisture. Depending on the specific formulation, meats or meat byproducts, poultry or poultry byproducts, grain, grain byproducts, fish meal, fiber sources, milk products, and vitamin and mineral supplements are

combined, extruded, and dried into bitesized pieces. The pieces are then covered with flavor enhancers, such as animal fat, which give them increased palatability. The primary advantages of dry cat food are lower cost and convenience in allowing "free choice" feeding. However, dry food may be less palatable to a cat, and, depending on the types and quality of the ingredients, may also be less digestible than moist food. If you do use dry food, it is important to store unused portions in a cool, dry location, and not to use the food after its expiration date (which is printed on the container). Often owners buy large amounts of dry food that can sometimes last for 3 to 6 months; therefore, checking the expiration date before feeding it to your cat is very important. Lengthy storage decreases the activity and potency of many vitamins and increases the likelihood that fats have become rancid. Storing dry cat food in an airtight container can help prevent nutrient deterioration and help maintain palatability.

Semi-Moist Food



Semi-moist food contains approximately 35 percent moisture and often resembles ground- or wholemeat tidbits. Meat and meat byproducts are the primary ingredients. They are combined with soybean meal, cereals, grain byproducts, and preservatives. The cost is generally mid-range, and these foods may be more appealing than dry cat food to some cats. Semi-moist food can also be fed free choice. However, after the package is opened, palatability decreases and spoilage increases because of dehydration.

Canned Food

Canned cat food has a moisture content of at least 75 percent, making it a good dietary source of water. It is generally the most expensive type of cat food, but it also is highly palatable to most cats, and different varieties are plentiful, which can be helpful if your cat is a finicky eater. Canned food has the longest shelf life when unopened, but any unused portion of opened canned cat food should be refrigerated to maintain quality and prevent spoilage. Gourmet canned cat foods generally feature meats, such as kidney or liver, and whole meat byproducts as primary food ingredients. Some brands, however, may be nutritionally incomplete, and it is important to read the nutrition labels carefully on such specialty cat-food items to ensure that they have a nutritional guarantee.

How Do I Choose a Food for My Cat?

High-quality commercially prepared cat foods have been scientifically developed to give your cat the correct balance of nutrients and calories. Basic minimum nutritional requirements for cats have been established by the Feline Nutrition Expert (FNE) Subcommittee of the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO), and pet-food manufacturers use these standards in producing cat foods.

When you're shopping for a healthy food for your cat, reading the nutrition label on the packages is the best way to compare foods. Pet-food manufacturers are required to supply certain nutrition information on the package. Labeling

regulations are established by the AAFCO (www.aaftco.org) and the United States Food and Drug Administration. All pet foods that carry an AAFCO approved nutritional guarantee, often referred to as the "AAFCO statement," are considered to be complete and balanced. These standards were formulated in the early 1990s by panels of experts on canine and feline nutrition. A food may be certified in two ways: (1) by meeting AAFCO's published standards for content, or (2) by passing feeding tests or trials. Most researchers agree that feeding tests are superior in assessing the nutritional adequacy of a food.

Throughout a cat's life, there are stages in which the cat requires different nutrients. These stages include kittenhood, adulthood, pregnancy, and lactation. The nutritional claim on the cat-food label should state the stage of a cat's life cycle for which the food is a complete and balanced product. It should also state that it meets the requirements of the AAFCO. Feeding a cat a product that does not have a nutritional claim on the label cannot guarantee a complete and balanced diet for the animal. Often owners will find products that say they have been formulated for "all life stages," which simplifies things for owners with multiple cats of different ages or circumstances.

In choosing a cat food, it is also important to read the ingredients list. This names all items used in the product, including flavor enhancers, artificial colors, and preservatives. The items are listed in order of decreasing proportional weight. Meat, meat byproducts, or seafood should be listed among the first few ingredients, because that indicates that the food probably contains enough animal-source ingredients to supply essential amino acids and essential fatty acids. Nonetheless, addition of some nutrients (e.g., the amino acid taurine, and B vitamins, including thiamine and niacin) may be necessary to offset the fiber content of the diet or degradation of nutrients that occurs during the manufacturing process.

Once you have determined that a food is complete and balanced, choosing between the types of food may be a matter of what your cat prefers. Some cats like canned food, some like dry food, and some like a combination of the two. Today's market offers many well-formulated foods for cats at all life stages, so you can choose the ones that work best for your cat.



What about Homemade Diets?

Formulating your own cat food is a difficult and time-consuming process. Also, the nutrients in the formula may not be available in the right quantities and proportions to be beneficial to your cat. It is usually recommended that cat owners use a commercial nutritionally balanced product, unless a veterinarian recommends a homeformulated recipe for medical purposes. Often these recipes come from published sources and are created by veterinarians certified in animal nutrition.

Can I Give My Cat Treats?

Giving your cat a treat from time to time isn't going to do any harm, but there are a few things to keep in mind. Treats should only be fed occasionally. They should not be a steady diet for your cat, because they lack the proper proportion of basic

nutrients a cat requires to maintain its health. A rule of thumb is not to let treats exceed 10 to 15 percent of the cat's daily diet. Also, some foods should be avoided entirely. Although raw meat is an excellent source of many nutrients, it is not recommended as a food or a treat for cats, because it is a potential vehicle for toxoplasmosis and other infectious diseases. Some cats that have consumed canned fish products meant for humans have developed deadly neurological disorders. Also, milk is not generally recommended as a treat for cats. Adult cats fed a nutritious diet don't need milk, and many cats are lactose-intolerant, which means that the lactose in milk and milk products can cause stomach upset.

What Else Do I Need to Consider?

Environmental conditions can affect a cat's eating habits. For example, heavy-traffic areas, noise, the presence of other animals, dirty food containers, or nearby litter boxes can deter a cat from eating. Try to be sensitive to your cat's eating behavior, and make necessary adjustments to provide optimum feeding conditions.

Also remember that cats vary greatly in characteristics such as the amount of food they need to consume to ensure optimal weight and health maintenance. Be careful not to overfeed your cat. Overfeeding can lead to obesity, which is the most common nutrition-related problem in cats. An overweight cat is prone to other health problems such as diabetes and arthritis. Commercial pet foods formulated to help cats lose weight are available. Ask your veterinarian to help you determine the ideal body weight for your cat, and follow your veterinarian's suggestions on how to adjust your cat's diet to attain and maintain that weight.

Although many cats are content to eat a single product, some cats may develop finicky eating habits and become very selective about what foods they'll accept. Feeding your cat two or three different cat foods provides flavor variety, and may prevent your cat from developing an exclusive preference for a single food, so that if a medical condition dictates a change in diet, your cat may have an easier time adjusting.

Also remember that not eating can lead to serious medical problems in cats. This is true for sick cats that lack an appetite, for cats on a diet, and for the finicky cat that refuses to eat. A veterinarian should examine any cat that refuses to eat and is losing weight.



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