

Cat Health: Nutrition



In the wild, cats live almost exclusively on meat. The “perfect” natural cat meal—a mouse—is about 50 percent fat, 40 percent protein, and 3 percent carbohydrate. Their sense of taste is much less developed than that of people or dogs. They have fewer taste buds, which can detect salt, sour, and bitter tastes, but not sweetness. Cats also have less digestive enzyme activity than dogs. Increasing the carbohydrate component of a cat’s diet does not stimulate increased dietary enzyme production, secretion, or activity, as it does in dogs. To remain healthy cats must have specific amino and fatty acids in their diets that can only be found in meat. Without proper nutrition, a cat will not grow or reproduce normally, maintain good health, or develop a strong immune system capable of fighting infection.

Choosing the Right Diet

A well-balanced, tasty diet is critical to a cat’s overall health and well-being. Cat owners can either make a homemade diet or use commercial cat food. The vast majority of cat owners in North America rely on the latter. There are three main types of commercial pet food: dry, canned, and semi-moist. Each can be found in generic, branded, and premium forms. Frozen and refrigerated diets are also available.

Nutritional comparisons between food types should be made on a “dry matter basis,” which factors out the water content of the semi-moist and canned products. With so many different foods on the market today, it can be challenging to figure out which diet is “best.” Consult your veterinarian for specific dietary concerns. The following are some general guidelines.

Age Matters

It is important to feed cats the right diet during the various stages of life: kittenhood, adulthood, and the geriatric years. Highly active cats, pregnant queens, and lactating females have additional nutritional requirements. Cats with specific medical conditions, such as bladder stones, kidney disease, allergies, skin and coat problems, diabetes, or gastrointestinal disorders, may benefit from specialized prescription diets that are available through a veterinarian.

Dry Cat Food

Many cats don’t find dry food very appealing. Most dry cat food (kibble) contains some form of carbohydrate to bind it. Carbohydrates are broken down during the high-heat processing of kibble, increasing their digestibility. Nutritionally, carbohydrates in dry cat food are primarily non-essential “fillers.” Kibble is less expensive than canned food and can be left out all day so the cat can eat whenever it wants to. Dry food also helps keep a cat’s teeth clean. However, low-quality dry cat food may not contain enough protein from meat sources. In addition, some cats become dehydrated when only fed kibble.

Canned Cat Food

Canned food tends to be the tastiest to cats. It contains a high percentage of water, which helps prevent dehydration. High-quality canned food usually has few (or no) carbohydrates and lots of fat and meat protein. Poor-quality canned food is packed with non-meat products and may not be complete and balanced.

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Unlike kibble, canned cat food does not promote dental health and cannot be left out for long periods of time. Most cats turn their noses up at refrigerated canned food; it should be warmed to room temperature before being offered.

Note: Cats fed from pop-top cans have a significantly greater risk of developing hyperthyroidism, possibly due to some component of the can lid.

Semi-Moist Cat Food

Although semi-moist food has lots of eye appeal to pet owners and often comes in shapes and colors to resemble fish, poultry, or meat, it is usually full of preservatives, sugar, and artificial colors. More expensive than kibble, semi-moist may be a bit cheaper than canned food.

Feline Obesity: An Overview

Companion cats are prone to becoming fat. Statistics show that about 40 percent of domestic cats are obese—almost always caused by overfeeding. Healthy cats should have a layer of fat covering their ribs, which provides padding and insulation. This layer should not be too thick, but the ribs should not be prominent.

An owner should be able to feel her cat's ribs when rubbing her hands down the cat's side. Viewed from above, cats should have a defined waist at their flank area, just in front of their hips and just behind their rib cage.

Once a cat becomes overweight, it is an uphill battle to help it take the pounds off. Fortunately, well-balanced commercial weight-loss diets are increasingly available at pet supply stores. Cats have very particular nutritional requirements, and it is difficult to create a home-cooked diet which supports all of a cat's unique nutritional needs.

Potential Health Implications

Overweight cats have an increased risk of developing serious health problems, including arthritis, heart problems, hormonal abnormalities, bone and joint disorders, and type 2 diabetes, among many others. They also are predisposed to hepatic lipidosis, a potentially life-threatening condition that affects their liver. Owners of obese cats have several options to help them lose weight. The most effective solution is a combination of increasing the cat's activity level and modifying its diet.