

Feeding Your Feline

By Karen Sueda, DVM

As the old adage goes, “You are what you eat.” Selecting the right diet is especially important for cats because of the unique way that they break down food for energy.



Meat Eaters

Cats are obligate carnivores, which means that they must eat a balanced, meat-based diet. They have a special need for certain amino acids, the building blocks of proteins, which are found in high levels in meat. If a cat does not eat a diet containing these special amino acids, like taurine and arginine, serious and often fatal diseases can develop.

Because cats require a balanced, meat-based diet, they should not be fed a vegetarian diet, nor a diet consisting solely of tuna, hamburger or another meat source, without explicit guidance from a veterinarian. Similarly, cats should not be fed dog food, since most dog foods do not provide adequate levels of vital amino acids or vitamins for cats.

Selecting a Diet

A commercially available, “over-the-counter” diet will meet the nutritional needs and discerning tastes of most healthy cats. Just as with human foods, select brand names that you and your veterinarian know and trust. Always read the labels carefully. To ensure that the food is regulated and meets certain nutritional standards, look for the seal of approval from the American Association of Feed Control Officers (AAFCO).

Many brands offer choices for different life stages (kittens, adults, and senior cats); the different types of food contain different levels of protein, calories, or ingredients. Some types of cat food contain additives or supplements, or they are specifically designed to control or prevent different diseases. Additionally, prescription diets are available for ill animals or cats with chronic diseases. Consult with your veterinarian to determine what type of food is best for your cat or before changing your cat’s diet.

Canned vs. Dry Food

Both canned (wet) and dry (kibble) food are available for cats. Canned food tends to be more tasty to cats than dry food, and many brands come in a wide variety of flavors. However, unlike dry food, canned food cannot be left out all day, since it may spoil. Dry food helps reduce plaque and tartar build-up on teeth and, on a “cost per calorie” basis, is less expensive than canned food.

The “Finicky” Feline

Cats are notorious for being picky eaters. Some cats develop this habit because they only received a single type of food when they were young. Offering a variety of foods at a young age may broaden the range of foods a cat will accept when she is older. Some

adult cats are “taught” to become finicky eaters. They learn that their people will offer them something tastier if they refuse to eat their regular meal. However, “fussy eating” can also be caused by a variety of medical conditions. If your cat stops eating, consult with your veterinarian immediately.

Raw Diets

Though popular, raw-meat diets have not been shown to be more beneficial than feeding your cat commercial cat food. Many of these diets do not contain appropriate levels of essential vitamins, minerals and amino acids. The risk of contamination from harmful bacteria (e.g., *Salmonella* and *E. coli*) or parasites (e.g., *Toxoplasma gondii*) far outweighs any benefits a raw-meat diet might have.

Obesity

Obesity is the most frequent nutritional disease affecting cats. Approximately 25 percent of cats seen by veterinarians are overweight. As with people, obese cats can develop serious health problems, including liver and heart problems and diabetes. Prevention and treatment of obesity entails monitoring your cat’s weight and consulting with your veterinarian about the type and amount of food to feed him. Feeding during mealtime only (instead of leaving out a bowl of food all the time), a weight-control diet, or increasing your cat’s exercise (playtime) may be recommended. Giving your cat food-dispensing toys that require him to “work” for his food or teaching him tricks may also help.

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