



Created by Veterinarians  
powered by VIN



## Nutrition for Your Cat

Jacqueline Brister, DVM

Revised: June 15, 2024

Published: November 01, 2018

Unlike dogs and people, which are omnivores and gain nutrition from both plants and meat, cats are obligate carnivores. This means that they get most of their nutrients from animal products. One scientific study showed that when cats in the wild live on prey (such as mice, that they hunt and kill), their diet is primarily protein (55%), some fat (45%), and only a very small percentage of carbohydrates (1-2%).

These are specific numbers from just one study, and that study didn't follow all those cats around and look at the long-term health impacts of diet or compare a wild, scavenging cat's environment to that of an inactive indoor cat. However, this and similar studies show that a cat's diet should probably consist of high amounts of protein, moderate amounts of fat, and low amounts of carbohydrates.

One of the likely reasons behind these nutritional percentages is that a cat's diet is based on the methods by which their body breaks down and metabolizes foods.

### Are Carbohydrates Bad for Cats?

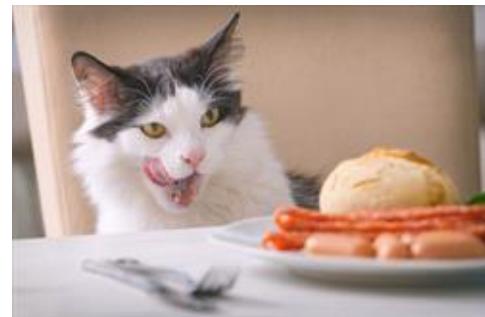
Depending on a cat's life stage, the type of carbohydrate, and how it is manufactured, cats can digest an appropriate amount of carbohydrates efficiently. Small amounts of carbohydrates are necessary for their diets (e.g., fiber aids digestion and colonic health).

### All Proteins Are Not Equal

Fish-based diets can sometimes have an imbalance of phosphorus and magnesium, which are important nutrients for cats. Feeding a diet made almost entirely of canned tuna can cause vitamin E deficiency. Your cat's diet needs to consist of more than just choice cuts of meat; organ meats and fat are also important. The key is balance and ensuring nutritional needs are met.

### Additional Nutritional Needs of a Cat

In addition to your cat's protein requirements, they are deficient and/or can't make certain nutrients needed for survival. Instead, they must get these nutrients from the foods they eat. Important dietary nutrients include amino acids, which are molecules that form proteins, as well as vitamins such as vitamin B (niacin) and vitamin D.



Many of these important nutrients are primarily obtained from animal products (e.g., liver, protein, fat), which further highlights the importance of a diet high in animal protein. When researching commercial cat foods, make sure these nutrients are part of the ingredients. If you are unsure if your cat's current diet has these nutrients, ask your veterinarian.

## Water

The domestic house cat is believed to have descended from wild desert cats. They can survive on less water than some other animals, such as dogs. This is great for survival but can be a problem in the long term because they have less of a drive to seek water when their bodies need it. This lack of water can lead to a variety of issues over time.

This information leads many researchers to recommend canned food because of its higher water content (70%-80% water) over dry food (10%-12% water). Other ways to make sure your cat gets enough water include offering more options for drinking, such as multiple water bowls throughout the house, a kitty water fountain, or occasionally letting a faucet drip to tempt them to drink.



## Canned Food vs Dry Kibble

Evidence suggests that canned commercial diets (wet food) high in protein and low in carbohydrates may be the best diet for many cats; however, more research is needed. Some veterinarians have also noticed that common issues in feline medicine, such as urinary tract disease and chronic gastrointestinal (GI) issues, are seen much more often in cats that are fed dry diets alone. Hopefully, more veterinary studies in this area will be conducted to shed further light on these findings.

Another benefit of canned food over dry is that the water content helps keep the sensation of feeling full, so your cat won't consume too many calories. Many veterinarians will switch an overweight cat that has been eating dry food to a canned food diet as the first step toward weight loss, but the diet should also be appropriately fortified to make sure essential nutrients are in the right concentrations. It is important to note that canned diets tend to be more expensive than dry kibble diets, and there is often more food waste. Canned diets may not be for every family.

## Raw Diets

Raw diets aren't ideal for any pet, even for the carnivorous cat. It is difficult to properly make a raw diet that includes necessary nutrients, vitamins, amino acids, proteins, fats, and carbohydrates and is correctly balanced. Raw meat can also contain bacteria and parasites that can make not only your cat sick but you as well. Outdoor and feral cats that eat only prey animals may have a slightly decreased risk of this issue because the kill is fresh, but they can still catch diseases such as [toxoplasmosis](#) from eating raw prey.

## When to Feed

Many feline species found in the wild tend to be grazers, eating multiple small meals throughout the day and night. This tendency is thought to be associated with the types of prey they hunt. Domestic cats are the same, even if they eat commercial cat food. Leaving an appropriate amount of dry food out all day or using a timed feeder so that cats can eat as they need to works pretty well for most cats as long as they do not overeat. If using canned food, or if your cat is on a calorie-restricted diet, you can offer smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day to help keep them on their body's natural schedule.

## Making a Change to Feeding Schedules

Whether you are transitioning from freely fed kibble to periodically feeding canned food throughout the day, trying to get your cat on a schedule to better manage its calorie intake, trying to change from feeding one to two times a day to allowing more grazing, or just trying to readjust your sleeping schedule, the key is *gradual change*.



Cats are absolutely creatures of habit. Just about every cat owner out there will tell you that when Daylight Savings Time hits, their cats' tummies do not "spring forward" with the new time. What do you do?

### Tips for Starting a New Feeding Schedule:

- For slight changes in feeding times (like transitioning to Daylight Savings Time or a new starting time at work), adjust the new feeding time by 15-minute increments over one to two weeks.
- To change to free feeding, decrease your cat's regular meals by one-fourth the amount and then offer the extra in the form of a snack in the morning and a snack in the afternoon. Gradually transition to four equal small meals a day, then try six small meals a day. This can be difficult (or may not be appropriate) for cats that are not naturally grazers and have a tendency to overeat.
- To change from free feeding to set meals, start by reversing the above transition to regular meals. Offer six portions spaced out throughout the day instead of free-feeding, then gradually decrease the number of meals to two meals a day, increasing the portions as you go along to make sure your cat is getting the appropriate amount of daily calories.
- To change to regularly scheduled wet food meals from freely fed dry kibble, start by transitioning to a regular schedule using their normal dry food diet. Once they are comfortable with their new feeding schedule, gradually mix in wet food with these regular meals (making sure to decrease the amount of dry food in proportion to the amount of wet food to avoid overfeeding your cat). With time, decrease the amount of kibble compared to wet food until you have them completely transitioned.
- Be patient and transition as slowly as you can. If your cat quits eating or drives you crazy because their schedule has changed, go back a few steps in the transition process and start again. Some cats are very stubborn and are not up for big changes. If this is the case with your cat, a compromise of snacks throughout the day or a mix of dry and wet food may be the best you can do.
- If in doubt, ask your veterinarian for more recommendations. You definitely won't be the first cat owner to have a cat who only wants to eat one thing and only wants to eat it on their chosen schedule. Cats are very intelligent, independent animals, which is part of what makes them so great, but that also means it is pretty common for them to want things done their own way.

## How Much to Feed

How much to feed depends on what you are feeding. Many commercial cat foods have a list describing the recommended amount per weight on the can or bag. However, these recommendations are only general guidelines from the manufacturer. Feed the amount your cat needs for a healthy weight (which should be determined by your veterinarian), not what the cat currently weighs.

For example, if your cat weighs 17 pounds but should weigh 12 pounds, slowly adjust the amount of food appropriate for a 12-pound cat. If your cat needs to lose weight, discuss your concerns with your veterinarian before starting a diet/calorie restriction plan since a specific diet is usually needed to do this safely. Being overweight is a significant health problem and should be prevented whenever possible or reversed if needed.

It is also important to measure food correctly. Use a gram scale or measure food by volume with measuring cups rather than estimating the amount. Feeding just 10 extra pieces of dry kibble a day can contribute to 10% weight gain in a year, equivalent to an entire pound of body weight in most cats!

Keep in mind that feeding a suitable amount of food will not stop your cat's urge to hunt. In the wild, hunting often requires many attempts before success, so the instinct to hunt tends to be separate from a feeling of fullness. Cats get enrichment from hunting (i.e., enhanced quality of life from doing and acting on important cat behaviors), even if they don't eat what they catch. You can help provide your cat with this type of enrichment by letting them play with mice or feathered toys to help stimulate their hunting instincts without affecting their waistlines.



## Determining Quality

Always discuss your cat's nutrition concerns with your veterinarian. Veterinarians are trained in nutrition and understand the delicate balance of nutrients needed to keep your cat healthy. Your veterinarian can make food recommendations based on your pet's personal physical examination and health status.

Help ensure your cat is eating an appropriate commercial diet for their life stage by making sure the food meets the nutritional standards of the [Association of American Feed Control Officials](#) (AAFCO), either by formulation or by using feeding tests. AAFCO publishes guidelines yearly to help keep the nutritional appropriateness of pet foods; in many cases, these recommendations are then adopted at the state level to become law.

The monitoring and enforcement of pet food law is under the jurisdiction of state and federal officials, but the manufacturers bear a lot of responsibility to ensure nutritional adequacy. Unfortunately, pet foods have no certification or approval process; however, a large, reputable manufacturer following AAFCO guidelines and many other production standards helps ensure quality and safety.

## Avoiding a Picky Eater

Cats tend to develop a liking for certain textures, flavors, smells, and temperatures of food. Preferences are fine, but extreme pickiness can make changing diets or getting a sick cat to eat difficult. Consider offering your cat a variety of food options in early life to help them avoid becoming stuck on certain foods.

Tips for helping a picky eater transition to new foods include:

- Maintaining a safe space for your cat's meals (e.g., low noise, no concern with other pets trying to eat the food or bother your cat while eating).
- Make sure a picky appetite is not poor because of illness (e.g., nausea from stomach upset, pain from arthritis).
- Consider warming wet food to enhance smell and taste, but make sure it's not too hot.
- Mixing the food your cat is used to with the new food and transition slowly over several days or weeks.
- Cats often refuse new diets when stressed but will eat them under normal conditions, so make sure the atmosphere is stress-free during the transition.

## Medical Management Through Food

Veterinary therapeutic diets have been formulated to address medical problems in cats. Medical disorders that can be helped with specific diets include kidney disease, dental disease, hyperthyroidism, diabetes mellitus, urinary tract disorders, GI diseases, and

pancreatitis. If your cat is experiencing a medical illness, especially one that is chronic or ongoing, talk to your veterinarian about whether a veterinary therapeutic diet might be helpful.

## Using Food Behaviors to Enhance Daily Life

In addition to meeting nutritional and caloric needs, food can provide enrichment for cats, especially indoor cats, by stimulating their predatory impulses. This helps them live a happier, less stressful, and more cat-like life. Examples of enrichment through food are hiding meals in food puzzles and letting cats play with food-containing toys in a way that stimulates a cat's natural predatory instinct of hunting for food.



Remember that if a cat is on a restricted diet, you can use toys that stimulate the cat's predator response, such as small, mouse-sized toys that squeak or make high-pitched noises. Toys that move unpredictably are especially fun for cats. This type of feeding or playing can help increase your cat's activity level, decrease their stress, and may help keep them more physically fit.

## Common Myths About Food

While many misconceptions exist about cats and food, a few common ones are listed below. You already know the truth about the most important one: cats are not omnivores but, in fact, are carnivores.

- **Taste.** Believe it or not, cats are not capable of tasting sweet flavors. That type of flavor is not part of the chemical receptors in their taste buds. This is likely associated with them being carnivorous as very few animal products or by-products are sweet, so they likely just don't need the flavor profile.
- **Dairy products** such as milk, cheese, and cream: Many adult cats are lactose intolerant, usually developing this intolerance after maturity. Even small sips of any kind of milk or small bites of cheese can cause a tummy ache, loose stool, and excess gas.
- **Cats only eat what they need.** While this may be true for some cats, others are just as likely to overindulge as some people do. Research shows that certain cats will eat when stressed, similar to how certain people jokingly state that they "eat their feelings." Pet owners need to understand this so that they can ensure their cat is fed the proper amount of food for their body's metabolic and physiologic needs rather than their emotional needs.
- **Dry kibble helps reduce dental issues.** Kibble does not significantly reduce the risk of dental tartar and dental disease, except for a few specific types. (Discuss with your veterinarian the available options.) The most effective way to prevent dental tartar is to brush your cat's teeth every single day. If you are avoiding switching to wet food to help keep your cat's teeth healthy, no worries! If you are still concerned, offer crunchy dental treats as an alternative.

## Bottom Line:

### Feed Balanced Diets Appropriate for Your Cat's Life Stage, and Avoid Overfeeding

Cats are not like people or dogs. They are carnivores and are adapted to eat a diet with specific nutrients. Your cat's overall health can be significantly improved if obesity is avoided, and their lives are made more interesting with enrichment activities involving food. Canned foods can help keep good hydration and satiety (i.e., a feeling of fullness after eating). Talk to your veterinarian about which diet is best for your pet and how much to feed.

URL: <https://veterinarypartner.vin.com/doc/?id=9063758&pid=192396b645625-b119-409b-bf92-b6f68228bbd9.1769037527>



The content of this site is owned by Veterinary Information Network (VIN®), and its reproduction and distribution may only be done with VIN®'s express permission.

The information contained here is for general purposes only and is not a substitute for advice from your veterinarian. Any reliance you place on such information is strictly at your own risk.

Links to non-VIN websites do not imply a recommendation or endorsement by VIN® of the views or content contained within those sites.