General Practice Service
Willows Information Sheets

Cat nutrition
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What is special about cat nutrition?

As a balanced diet plays a vital role in maintaining your cat’s health and vitality, it is important that you familiarise yourself with some of the basics of cat nutrition.

Cats’ nutritional requirements are very different from those of dogs or humans - what is good for us is not necessarily good for your cat. Cats must eat a significant amount of meat and cannot tolerate a low protein diet. They also need high dietary levels of certain amino acids (parts of proteins) such as taurine and arginine. These particular amino acids (which are not important in human nutrition) aren’t found in plant proteins, such as soy or bean protein, and this is one reason why it is impossible for cats to survive in the long-term on a vegetarian diet.

Vegetables do not play an important role in a cat’s diet - many constituents of plants which are good for us, such as carotenes, simply cannot be used by a cat’s body.

Although cats can digest and metabolise many carbohydrates (including some sugars), they do not need to eat them, and instead normally obtain the energy they need from protein. In fact some sugars, such as one type found in cows’ milk, cannot be properly digested by cats and, as a result, those cats that often drink milk are prone to diarrhoea.

Cats also have different vitamin requirements from humans. For example they need a lot more vitamin A than we do, (but not too much, as this can lead to severe health problems such as deformities of the skeleton). On the other hand, unlike us, cats do not need any vitamin C in their food.

A cat’s sense of taste also seems to be different from our own - they appear to be very good at differentiating different flavours of meat, but unable to taste or differentiate between sweet foods.
Prescription diets

There are many special diets available to help cats with certain types of disease such as kidney problems or arthritis. Many such foods are available only on prescription as their nutrient content can be very different from that of normal food – this is similar to the situation in humans who have certain health problems and who have to keep to a strict diet. So while to us most cat foods look and smell alike, there can be vast differences in their quality and content. Please contact us for advice if you are unsure about what to feed your individual cat.

Types of food

Despite many years of domestication, cats are still adapted to live on small prey such as mice or birds, and most pet cats would still be perfectly content to live on such a diet. If you have a ‘mouser’ it poses no great problem, except to say that such cats are more prone to getting worms and other parasites and can also get infectious disease through their prey, some of which can potentially be transmitted to humans (See Zoonoses in dogs and cats information sheet) Most cats like the easy life, however, and prefer to be supplied with regular meals by their doting owners!

The easiest and safest way to cater for all your cat’s nutritional needs is to feed a complete diet – such diets are available in moist form (tins, pouches) or as dry food. The large pet food companies do a great deal of research to develop cat foods that are aimed at optimal nutrition and, as a result, many cats eat a more balanced diet than the majority of humans! Feeding a complete diet is what we strongly recommend, and these days it is easy to find excellent food for different life stages, lifestyles and even breeds of cats.

It is very difficult to prepare a well balanced diet for cats at home. Cooking destroys some of nutrients which cats need – for example the amino acid taurine (see above), but on the other hand feeding raw food such as fish can also lead to serious health problems. Table scraps should never be fed to cats because they are not nutritionally balanced and usually have a salt content which is much too high. Some common ingredients can even be toxic to cats, e.g. onion powder (which is often used in ready-made sauces and spice mixtures) can cause severe anaemia in cats.

What is better – wet or dry food?

Any good quality complete food, whether wet or dry will provide everything a cat needs in its diet.

Dry food comes in kibbles of various shapes and sizes. Crunching hard kibbles can help to slow down the development of dental tartar and tooth decay. There is even dry food specifically manufactured to clean teeth during eating. Unlike wet food a dry diet is very concentrated and a little goes a long way – this can sometimes lead owners to feed too much of a dry diet, thinking that the advised amount cannot possibly be enough.

Cats usually drink more when they are on dry food, but in total they still tend to take in less moisture than cats eating wet food, as wet food contains a large amount of water in itself. As a result some cats (e.g. those with certain urinary problems) should be fed a wet diet. A drawback of wet diets is that they tend to encourage the development of tartar, so dental hygiene measures such as tooth brushing are recommended for cats on moist food.

Once you know the advantages and disadvantages of dry and wet food, you can decide (or in many cases your cat will decide!) what you prefer. Providing a good quality, appropriate food is chosen, your cat will get a balanced diet on wet, or dry food or a mixture of both.

How often do cats need to be fed?

Cats prefer to eat many small meals a day rather than one or two big ones. A cat’s stomach is relatively small and eating too much food at a time can sometimes lead to gastrointestinal problems. In an ideal world food should always be available for cats to ensure they can eat in many small portions. However, modern cat food tends to be very tasty and rich and many of our cats are not very active animals. As a result many cats become overweight if they have continuous access to food, and in such cases regular small meals are a better option.

Water should be available at all times. Many people feel that their cat never ever drinks. This is not the case, cats do drink, but they need to drink a lot less than dogs, especially if they are being fed a moist diet, and because they drink daintily it is easy to miss the fact that a cat is having a little sip from the bowl. In addition, many cats prefer to drink outside from puddles or garden ponds or have other very individual ways of getting a drink.

My cat is too heavy. Is this a problem, and if so, what can I do?

Unfortunately obesity is all too common in cats in the UK these days. Overweight cats are more prone to health problems such as heart disease, arthritis and diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes) - the latter is a rare disease in slim cats. Occasionally diabetes in cats can be controlled by weight loss only. In many cases however, lifelong injections of insulin are necessary. Overweight cats that stop eating because they are unwell or in pain, can also develop very severe liver function problems within a very few days because of the special way a cat’s metabolism works.

As with people, slim cats generally live much longer then overweight cats. It is therefore important to keep an eye on your cat’s waistline.
Cats do not automatically become overweight after spaying or when they live indoors, they only become overweight when they take in too many calories. Many owners feel that the advised daily amount a cat should eat cannot possibly be enough – it does not look like much when it sits in the bowl. It is important to remember that cats are much smaller creatures than we are – they should not and cannot eat an amount that looks sufficient to us! Cat food also tends to be quite concentrated and a little goes a long way. Many feeding guides on food packets overestimate what a cat needs, so you may find that your cat needs to eat considerably less than is advised on some packets.

Once it is obvious that your cat is too heavy it is advisable to discuss the situation with your veterinary surgeon. There are numerous ways to reduce your cat’s weight and it is necessary to find one that fits in with your life and suits your cat. In some cases just a reduction of the normal food can be enough, in others specific diet foods may be advisable. As already mentioned it can be dangerous and even life-threatening to ‘crash-diet’ an obese cat, so a slow gradual approach is important. While it is possible to increase the activity of a cat to a certain extent by playing with him or her, or providing more toys, it is impossible to slim an overweight cat just by increasing its activity. The best thing is to work out a diet plan with your vet, and to keep in regular contact with the vet to adjust the plan as necessary. As cats are very individual, the dietary approach and calorie restriction that causes significant weight loss in one cat may not help another cat at all. Do not be disheartened in that event, it just means that your cat needs a different approach. There is no such thing as a cat that cannot lose weight!

My cat is ill, should I change the food?

Diet can play an important part in the treatment and management of disease. It is therefore possible that we will advise that you change the food or avoid certain products if your cat is ill. What changes should be made and for how long depends very much on what is wrong with your cat. Many prescription diets are manufactured to help cats with very specific problems, and they may not be appropriate for a healthy cat. In multi-cat households it may therefore be necessary to separate cats with different nutritional needs during meal times.

While a change of diet is often necessary, it is important to introduce a new diet gradually and to make sure that your cat keeps eating throughout and does not refuse to eat food for significant periods of time. Cats can be a bit difficult when it comes to changing their food, but there are several ways to achieve this, and we are happy to advise you how to encourage your cat to eat a new diet.

If you have any queries or concerns regarding your cat’s diet, please do not hesitate to contact us.