

What You Need to Know about Your Cat's Diet



The question of how to put a cat on a diet that is both healthy for the cat and convenient for the owner is one that has plagued animal lovers for years. The good news is that there are more food choices than ever, and veterinarians are becoming increasingly conscious of the critical role nutrition plays in health.

This means that with a little research and regular veterinary consultations, you can find a cat diet that suits you and your pet. As you research diets, consider the five questions below to make sure you find the best food for your feline friend.

Is It a Complete and Balanced Diet?

Look for the words, “complete and balanced” on the food package. The manufacturer cannot use this phrase unless the food meets the minimum feline nutritional adequacy standards set forth by the Association of American Feed Control Officials. If your cat’s food does not have this phrase on the label, you should talk to your veterinarian.

By feeding your cat a diet that is not balanced, you could be putting your pet at risk for nutritional deficiencies that could lead to neurological problems, heart damage, vision issues, skin disease and many other health problems.



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How Good Are the Ingredients?

Not all balanced foods are of the same quality. Lower quality foods have artificial preservatives, colors and flavors. In addition, they have a high proportion of poorly digestible and incomplete protein sources including byproducts and various vegetable proteins.

Because cats are carnivores, they thrive when they get most of their protein from meat. When reading the ingredients list of a high-quality dry cat diet, you will note that meat is the first ingredient, and there are no fillers and few additives. The ingredients list of a high-quality canned food will have water as the first ingredient, and the second ingredient will be some type of meat.

Does It Meet Your Cat's Health Needs?

If you have a healthy adult cat, any high-quality balanced diet should work for your pet. Choosing a cat diet for an older pet or one with chronic health problems, including kidney disease, diabetes, joint disease, liver disease, allergies, skin issues, obesity and others, is more complex. Make sure you discuss your pet's condition with your veterinarian before choosing a new food or changing your pet's diet.

Is It the Best Type for You and Your Pet?

The problem of how to put a cat on a diet that fits with the owner's lifestyle is a common one. Fortunately, there are several types of commercial diets available, including dry, canned and frozen raw, so you should be able to find something that works for you and your cat.

For kitten-specific information, view our past post [here](#).

Dry

Dry food is easy and convenient. It is simple to store and can be left out all day. Problems with dry diets include their lack of moisture content and the fact that it is very easy to overfeed a cat when you use dry food.

You can read more about selecting a commercial food [here](#).

Canned

Canned foods provide a good source of water, an important component for maintaining the health of the kidneys, and they tend to be higher in protein than dry foods. They are also messy, more expensive than dry foods and cannot be left out for long periods.



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Beware of Frozen Raw

Frozen raw foods are becoming more widely available. This tries to mimic a wild cat's diet, and for this reason, a lot of pet owners have been wrongly lead to believe this is safe and healthy.

The truth is raw foods can be contaminated with fecal bacteria, E Coli and salmonella. These have the ability to make domestic cats sick, and they can also be very easily spread to your family – when your cat licks itself and you give it a pet (or if you have a cat that likes to 'groom' you).

Signs of food borne illness in pets are the same as in humans- severe vomiting or diarrhea. Contact your vet right away if they come down with these symptoms at any time.

How Much Cat Food Should Your Pet Be Eating?

Obesity is epidemic among house cats, so you need to have annual discussions with your veterinarian about how much cat food your pet actually needs. While many people have trouble figuring out how to put a cat on a diet, the method is simple. Once you know how much cat food your pet needs, just measure out the appropriate portions on a food scale or in a measuring cup.

the average
cat gets fed
this much



but only needs
this much
(less than 1
cup!)



Is My Cat Overweight or Obese?

The question, “Is my cat overweight?” is commonly asked by cat owners, and it is a valid reason for concern. Obesity is epidemic among housecats, and researchers have linked it to a variety of health problems including heart disease, respiratory disease, diabetes, joint disease, skin disease and other issues. To decide whether or not your cat is overweight and help your pet attain or maintain its ideal weight, start with the suggestions below.

Body Condition

The question, “Is my cat overweight?” is slightly misleading. This is because scale weight is not a very good way to distinguish between a normal cat and an overweight cat. Weight varies by breed and body composition, so some cats are overweight at 10 pounds while others are healthy at 15 pounds. A better way to determine whether or not a cat is overweight or obese is to assess its body condition.



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To assess body condition, you need to examine the cat and feel for fat under the skin. In a healthy cat, you can feel but not see its ribs under a thin layer of fat. Healthy cats also have visible waists when viewed from above, and their abdomens do not sag. Overweight and obese cats are broad, and you have to press down to feel their ribs. The more overweight the cat, the more difficult it is to feel its ribs. In addition, overweight cats do not have clearly defined waists, and they have sagging stomachs with noticeable fat pads.

Healthy Weight Ranges

While body condition is the best way to assess whether or not an individual cat is overweight, comparing your cat’s scale weight to breed averages can alert you to a potential problem. The following are average weight ranges for popular cat breeds from the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP):

- Domestic shorthair: 8 to 10 pounds.
- Siamese: 5 to 10 pounds.
- Maine coon: 10 to 25 pounds.
- Persian and Himalayan: 7 to 12 pounds.



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Choosing the Right Food for Your Overweight Cat

Simply feeding diet food to your cat is not the best way to put your pet on a diet. Many diet foods replace protein and fat with low-quality carbohydrates that are low in calories and poorly digestible. This means cats can eat larger amounts of diet food than regular food.

However, because fat and protein are linked to satisfaction, diet foods may not satisfy your cat. This can cause your pet to beg more often and overeat. In many cases, the best way to put a cat on a diet is to feed it smaller amounts of regular healthy food.



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Feeding Your Cat for Optimal Health

There is no one feeding schedule that works for every owner or every cat. While many owners find that their cats do best when fed two or three meals per day, feeding frequency is far less important than portion control. To help cats achieve and maintain ideal weight, owners need to talk to their veterinarians about how many calories their cats need each day and feed only enough food to provide the necessary calories. The caloric content of cat foods is available from food manufacturers.

Activity Level and Weight

Cats need to stay active to maintain optimum health. For owners of indoor cats, however, keeping pets active can be a bit of a challenge. Experts at APOP suggest owners try the following to encourage their cats to exercise:

- Move the food bowl around the house to force cats to walk to find food.
- Use toys to encourage cats to play.
- Create a food maze or obstacle course by hiding small amounts of the cat's regular food or treats around the house.
- Play with cats for a few minutes a few times each day.



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While activity is beneficial, it is important to note that a cat cannot exercise away a bad diet. Portion control is the single most important factor in cat weight-loss plans.

Common Cat Health Issues That Can Be Treated or Avoided By Diet

Good nutrition is critical for good health, so feeding your cat a healthy balanced diet can help prevent many common feline diseases. Further, owners and veterinarians can use special diets to treat health problems and reduce or eliminate the need to give medications. Below are five common cat health issues that can be prevented or treated with special diets.

Obesity

More than half of all house cats in North America are overweight or obese. Obesity makes it more difficult for them to move around and groom. It also predisposes the animal to a number of diseases including respiratory disease, certain cancers, diabetes, skin disease, arthritis, heart problems and other health issues.

The best solution to the problem is a proper diet. While many owners turn to diet foods to deal with obesity, the best way to help a cat lose weight or maintain its ideal weight is to feed the animal an appropriate amount of a high-quality food that is high in meat-based protein and contains an adequate amount of fat.



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Dental Disease

Periodontal disease is the most common disease found in cats. While no food can cure dental disease or completely prevent it, the right food can slow the progression of periodontal disease. To find a food that is effective against dental disease, look for a product certified by the Veterinary Oral Health Council.

Because dental diets work best as preventatives, start your cat on one of these foods immediately after a dental cleaning or as soon as the animal's permanent teeth erupt. Once an animal has significant plaque and tartar buildup, the only way to remove the buildup is through a professional cleaning performed under anesthesia.

Bladder Stones

Bladder stones are very common in felines, and veterinarians use special diets to control them. However, you should never choose a diet to treat or prevent this condition without consulting a veterinarian. This is because each type of stone forms under different conditions- not all have the same causes. This means that feeding the wrong type of food could make the problem much worse.

To choose an appropriate food to treat bladder stones, a veterinarian will examine a urine sample under a microscope. Once he or she knows what the stones are made of, he or she can prescribe the right type of food to dissolve or prevent them.

Regardless of the type of stones present, all cats with bladder stones benefit from increased water intake. If you have a cat with bladder stones, make sure to have plenty of fresh water available, and consider supplementing with canned food sometimes.



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Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD)

Characterized by diarrhea and occasional vomiting, this chronic condition is common among cats. While the condition cannot be cured, appropriate treatment can control symptoms. Typical treatment for IBD involves the use of an antibiotic, a probiotic and a special diet.

The best diet for a pet with IBD is one that is highly digestible, hypoallergenic and relatively low in fat. Pet food companies offer various diets meeting these criteria- check with your veterinary nutritionists to find one that's right for your pet.

Diabetes Mellitus

Diabetes is extremely common in middle-aged and senior animals. Initially, most diabetic cats need insulin injections to control blood sugar, but with careful management, many of these animals can eventually maintain appropriate sugar levels through diet alone. The decision to stop insulin therapy, however, must be made by a veterinarian based on blood tests.

Currently, veterinarians recommend a diet high in protein and low in carbohydrates for diabetic cats. Pets receiving insulin need to eat a meal each time they receive an insulin injection and owners should never give insulin to diabetic cats that are vomiting or not eating- they should see a veterinarian as soon as possible.

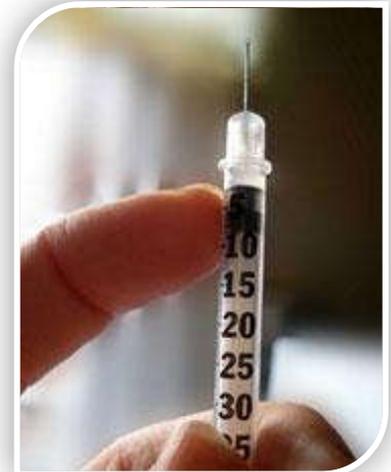


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Have you visited a Veterinary Nutritionist?

A veterinary nutritionist would recommend a high quality commercial diet or a balance home cooked diet to optimize your cat's health. Upper Canada Animal Hospital has one on staff who can help you balance your best friend's nutritional intake.

Give us a call today to schedule an appointment with the nutrition counselor, or to ask more specific questions about your feline's diet.