

CURRENT GUIDELINES FOR FEEDING CATS



Much has changed in the past 15 years or so as far as our knowledge about the nutritional needs of both animals and humans. Dogs and people are omnivores but cats are carnivores. They have a higher requirement for protein and their metabolism is different. As they've come to appreciate these differences, veterinary nutritionists are recommending that cats be fed differently than we have in the past.

We'd like to dispel some myths about cat nutrition and give you some guidance as to what to feed your cat. Over the past few years we have backed away from recommending mostly dry kibble diets and are prescribing more canned diets. There are several reasons for this.

Cats in the wild don't drink a lot of water. They get much of their moisture from the prey they eat and they don't have a very strong thirst reflex. When eating dry diets cats tend to hover on the edge of dehydration and produce strong, concentrated urine. Cats eating canned diets have more watery urine, which reduces risk for bladder crystals and stones and urinary obstruction. The extra moisture in canned foods is also of benefit for older cats with decreased kidney function.

We used to believe that cats and dogs eating dry diets had less tartar build-up on their teeth. Many cats swallow small kibble whole, however, and if they don't chew it, it doesn't have an effect on plaque or tartar build-up. Unless you are using a tartar control prescription diet it won't make much difference to tartar build-up whether you feed dry or canned cat food.

Tartar control is important, since 80% of cats have some degree of dental disease. If your cat is healthy otherwise, a dry tartar control food is great. If your cat has other health problems that would make canned food a better choice though, then maybe this isn't the way to go. Each cat's health concerns are different so a good choice for one cat may be a poor one for another.

Many cats don't like canned cat food. If a cat is refusing to eat the canned diet we are recommending, we can always work on getting more fluids into him in other ways. For example, let's say we have a cat that has been treated for bladder stones but won't eat a canned diet made to prevent future bladder problems. We might feed the cat a dry diet made for stones but also purchase a water fountain to encourage the cat to drink more. Many cats love to drink fresh flowing water and will consume more water when it's available this way.

You've probably heard about grain-free diets, which have been popular the past few years. It is not true that cats cannot digest carbohydrates, nor is it true that no cat should ever eat any carbohydrates. In the wild, cats catch and eat prey. Prey species have plants and grains in their digestive tracts, which cats eat and digest. Glucose and glycogen are the carbohydrates that every species uses to power their muscles, brain and tissues, so cats also ingest these simple carbohydrate molecules with every animal they eat. A mouse is 58% protein but also contains fat, carbohydrate, vitamins and minerals. The fact that a cat food has grain in it doesn't make it bad or unnatural. It is also not true that plant ingredients like wheat are common allergens in pets with food allergies.

It is true, though, that diets high in carbohydrates are not the best choice for cats. Unless a cat has kidney or liver disease, in which case lower protein diets are recommended, higher protein and lower carbohydrate levels are generally better. The problem with this is that it is very difficult for most people to tell by reading a pet food label how high quality the food is.

The 2nd most common health problem in cats, after dental disease, is obesity. About half the cats in the U.S. are overweight or obese and this number has gone up 71% since 2005. Unlike dogs and people, who feel full when they have eaten enough calories, cats feel full when they have eaten enough protein. When eating a diet lower in protein and higher in carbohydrates they tend to overeat because it takes a lot of food to get enough protein to achieve satiety – that full feeling of having eaten enough.

It's difficult to create a dry food with minimal carbohydrates in it because carbs are needed to create a dry food that holds

Visit our website or youtube and watch our nutrition videos to learn more about protein sources and evaluating pet food label. There are two videos, each about 10 minutes long. The links are:

Nutrition in Pet Foods

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xzdjjq0SzM&feature=plcp>

Protein in Pet Foods

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqBJBK-R7Cc&feature=plcp>

together and doesn't get rancid. Canned diets, on the other hand, can be very low in carbohydrate. The dry versions of "low carb" diets for cats contain about 15% carbohydrate and the canned versions only 5%. For cats that won't eat canned food, the dry versions will do but canned is preferred. Cats already overweight will usually lose weight on high-protein, low-carb diets. These diets help to prevent obesity and diabetes from occurring and they are important in treating these problems as well. (A "grain-free" diet can still be high in carbohydrates, it will just contain potatoes or green peas instead of grain.)

Along with obesity rates, diabetes cases in cats are soaring. Diabetes is an inherited disease but it often will never develop if a cat is maintained at a healthy weight. The more obese a cat becomes the more likely it will become diabetic. The risk is highest in middle aged cats 8-12 years old and males are affected twice as often as females.

Free choice feeding increases the risk, and diets high in carbohydrates, especially grains like wheat and corn, are also a factor. Cats with large abdominal fat deposits (big bellies) are more likely to become diabetic than cats with their fat more evenly distributed. Just 10 extra kibbles of dry food per day can cause 4 lbs of weight gain by age ten, and many cats, like many humans, tend to accumulate fat mostly in their bellies.

The best prevention and most important treatment for feline diabetes is to feed your cat a prescription diet made for diabetes management in an amount that will maintain a normal, lean body weight. It has been known for several years that many cats will go into remission and not need to receive insulin injections on either the canned or the dry versions of the high protein diabetes diets but we now know that the canned versions are more effective. Dr. Deborah Greco, the leading researcher of feline diabetes in the country, reports remission rates as high as 90% on canned Purina DM or Hill's M/D – prescription diets made specifically for diabetic cats. It takes time for these diets to alter a cat's metabolism so we will usually start a diabetic cat on insulin and then taper off of it as the body changes in response to the new diet.

Purina makes a great prescription diet for dental tartar control that is also higher in protein and lower in carbohydrates. (It's called DH, for Dental health.) This is our favorite diet for adult cats because it addresses both our dental disease and weight control concerns. Cats already overweight or diabetic, or those with kidney or bladder problems, should be on canned diets, at least in part - if they will eat them.

Most cat owners, unless advised otherwise, feed commercial dry diets by leaving the dish out all the time. Constant availability of high carbohydrate diets leads straight to obesity for many cats. Food should always be measured and metered out so that pets don't overeat.

Some cat owners feed only canned food or canned food in addition to dry. This also has drawbacks. It would be easy to say "Just feed canned food" but many over-the-counter canned foods are just as poor quality as the low cost dry ones. They usually contain lots of protein but it's poor quality, poorly digested protein that creates a lot of waste products for the liver and kidneys to handle. Young cats deal with these diets OK but older cats or ones with kidney or liver problems do not. An older cat with failing kidneys will die of kidney failure years sooner if eating OTC canned diets like Friskies, Fancy Feast or 9 Lives. It's difficult to switch an older cat off these diets and onto something healthier if they've been eating them all their lives, even when we know it would be life saving if we can do so.

It's more expensive to feed canned food and not as convenient. Inexpensive grocery store diets don't have enough fatty acids or antioxidants in them either. Pet food stores sell some better quality canned diets but it's difficult for a consumer to tell good from bad and many are not nearly as healthy as the fancy marketing campaigns make you think they are. There are also concerns about toxic chemicals leaching from the cans into the food.

So what's the correct answer here? There really isn't one correct answer that fits every cat and every situation. Our diet recommendations are individualized for each patient because it's complicated. It also becomes difficult to choose what and how to feed when you have multiple cats with different needs. It's usually easy to feed dogs separately because they eat a meal all at once. Cats like to nibble, so you can end up putting multiple types of food down multiple times a day while trying to keep the cats separated, which isn't very convenient.

Our basic recommendations are to feed dry Purina DH as your main diet if your cat is young and healthy. Measure out how much food you feed. Switch to T/D, which is Hill's tartar control diet, when your cat gets older. T/D is lower in protein and is designed for older cats with reduced kidney function. Feed at least some canned food right from the beginning so your cat is accustomed to it. That will make it easier to switch over to just canned food should you need to in order to treat health problems such as kidney or bladder diseases. Avoid cheap grocery store foods like the plague, both canned and dry, unless your cat won't eat anything else.

If your cat needs to lose weight, feed a prescription weight loss diet. You can choose a low carb diet or a low fat-high fiber one. Some cats do better on one than the other so sometimes we have to try a few things to see what works. Dry weight loss diets are available that are both low calorie and prevent dental tartar.

If your cat has other health issues that a particular diet would address, we will discuss that with you. Notice that we have not recommended that you feed an OTC food at all. If we had our choice, we would have every patient on a prescription diet because there is no pet that couldn't benefit from at least one of the extra benefits that high quality prescription diets provide – for example, tartar control, weight control, or extra fatty acids to treat arthritis and prevent heart disease, kidney disease and cancer.

OTC diets are required by law to provide nutrition that fits within certain parameters. These parameters don't allow for nutrients to be added in therapeutic amounts. Prescription diets are different. They can legally contain amounts of things, such as glucosamine for arthritis, that are high enough to treat diseases. They can also contain less of some ingredients than is legally required for an OTC diet, such as lower amounts of fat or fiber to treat certain digestive disorders.

Prescription diets have been tested and approved by the FDA just like drugs. We have data that says they are safe and effective. We don't have that assurance with OTC pet foods, and in fact pet food recall after pet food recall for problems such as Salmonella, toxic nutrient excesses and melamine shows that manufacturing problems are rampant in the pet food industry.

People are heavily influenced by marketing and PR when it comes to pet foods. Words like "no corn," "grain-free," "natural," "premium," "human grade" and "holistic" are thrown around with abandon yet mean nothing as far as determining the quality of a pet food. Examples:

- 1) A pet food that says "holistic" on the label can just as easily be made in a dirty facility with inferior ingredients as one that does not.
- 2) When pet foods are analyzed sometimes the ingredients don't even match what is on the label. A food that says chicken on the label can have no poultry DNA in it at all because some other meat was substituted instead and the consumer will have no idea.
- 3) "Grain-free" is a marketing term that fails to give you any information about the actual amount of carbohydrate in the food. Glucose is glucose and fiber is fiber – it doesn't matter to the body whether it came from rice or potato or corn. The pet food company just wants you to think it matters so you'll buy their food!

One last concern consumers have typically involves pet food company reputations. Many times people think they are buying a hand crafted, high quality diet from a small company that cares about their pet, but this is rarely true. Most pet foods are made by giant corporations. Proctor and Gamble Co., owner of the Iams Company, also owns Natura pet products. Natura makes Innova, Evo, California Natural, Healthwise, Mother Nature and Karma pet foods and products. The brands Diamond, Kirkland, Natural Balance, Wellness, Canidae, Chicken Soup and Premium Edge are all made in the same facility, and all were involved in a recent Salmonella recall.

Prescription diets such as Hill's, on the other hand, are made in that company's own facility so they have control over things like ingredient testing, cleanliness and processing. Nothing goes in the food that isn't on the label and nothing is on the label that isn't in the food. They have their own laboratory on-site so they can test each batch of ingredients and each batch of finished food to make sure it meets their standards. The facilities are inspected and are open for tours by veterinarians and veterinary technicians. Their nutrition research is published and the results of extensive food trials and testing on live dogs and cats are utilized when they formulate their diets.

If you've been told by someone in a pet store that veterinarians don't have training in nutrition, or we get kickbacks from Hill's for selling Science Diet, you've been lied to. Don't believe everything you hear! Nutrition and health are intimately connected – of course we learned about nutrition! If you've been told that Hill's food is bad because it contains corn and fillers or it's been bought out and is no longer high quality, you've been exposed to the food industry's version of the political negative attack ad. Much of this propaganda, from a scientific standpoint, doesn't even make sense.

What you feed your pet matters. Good food promotes good health. We're always happy to help you pick and choose the best products available!

Caring People Helping Pets



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