

Feeding Your Cat a Species-Specific Diet

Good nutrition is vital to good health! But what is a good diet for a cat? The media, the Internet, and the pet food industry are full of conflicting advice. **We advise feeding meat-based, canned cat food.**



In the beginning.....



It is only logical that we feed each species of animal the food that it was intended to eat. A cow and a horse are fed grass, hay and other plant materials. Each animal in a zoo is painstakingly fed the food items that they would eat in the wild; or they will most likely get very sick. If you had a hamster, guinea pig, iguana or a snake you would follow the same species-specific feeding.

Things became confusing when we made dogs our pets. Descendant of a scavenger, the wolf, a dog is not a true carnivore; but also not a true omnivore like humans. That means that dogs can eat a very wide variety of foods. They can share our food and we can manufacture foods for them. For the most part dogs will thrive on most food types.

When we decided to bring cats into our homes and turn them into pets we forgot about species-specific feeding. Since dogs were thriving on dog-food, people started to feed the same to cats. Initially thousands of cats died because dog food was not nutritionally complete for a cat. This continued thru the 1980's. Science and technology continued to modify dry dog food more and more until today's modern cat foods emerged in the 1990's. But sadly, we were still not feeding a species-specific diet. Truthfully, we were probably ignoring it. After all, who wants to feed their cat ground up rats, mice, birds, lizards, frogs and insects? However, that is what cats eat in the wild.

Only after the turn of the millennium did proper feline nutrition become a renewed topic. Cat owners and veterinarians wanted explanations as to why our indoor cats were ailing from diabetes, obesity, pancreatitis, kidney failure, bladder stones & crystals, etc..... It did not take long to discover that food was the root of the problem.

When we examine a cat's natural prey we find the following: Cat's prey items (birds and small mammals) are mostly made up of water; then protein; a little fat; and a very small amount of carbohydrate. Cats consume the entire animal: feathers, beak, bones, hair and intestinal content. Their food items also have a high (body) temperature: 101 °F - 105 °F .

Compare this to dry cat food: NO water (dehydrated); mostly carbohydrate; some protein; some fat; some plant based fiber. It becomes very clear that this is not what cats were intended to eat.

Since a ground rat / bird / mouse diet is not available we need to look towards quality canned foods. Canned foods are mostly water; then protein with a little fat and carbohydrate. It should not be a surprise that when we feed our cats a species-specific diet we find that problems like diabetes, obesity, kidney disease, bladder stones and crystals disappear.

Facts about Cats and Cat Nutrition

Cats are obligate carnivores and require meat-based diets. Cats are designed to eat a diet with abundant, high quality animal protein. We see this design in the structure of their digestive systems, the kinds of enzymes they have, and differences in their metabolism. Cats require more essential amino acids and more B vitamins than dogs or people do. Plant sources of protein that work well for us are nutrient poor for cats. Studies of feral cats show that they eat more than 90% of their diet in prey items. They do not eat grains, vegetables or fruit and our cats don't need these foods either.

Cats need water in their food. Cats are also designed to get most of their water from their meat-based diet. They lack a strong thirst drive and cats that eat only dry food tend to be mildly dehydrated. Dehydration is a

worry because urinary tract disease is common in cats. Cats fed dry food may drink more water from their bowls, but they still consume less water than cats fed canned food diets. Cats require fresh water and may prefer glass or ceramic water dishes, water that moves, and water that is distant from their food dish or litter box.

Cats have problems with dry and high carbohydrates diets. No matter what the manufacturers tell you, it is impossible to make a dry food that is low in carbohydrates. Dry foods may be made without grains, but they must have a carbohydrate source like yams, potatoes, or other vegetable in the manufacturing process. While grains are not good for cats, there is no scientific evidence that high carbohydrate vegetables are better. Free feeding of high carbohydrate foods may increase risk of serious and common illnesses like obesity, diabetes mellitus, inflammatory bowel disease, and pancreatitis. These conditions, in turn, increase the risk of urinary tract disease, joint disease, skin disorders and decreased quality of life.

Cats should be meal-fed rather than “free choice.” In the wild, cats spend a lot of time and energy hunting food. Of course, they are not always successful. Our cats still may do lots of hunting and food-seeking behavior, but if they are always successful they will usually become overweight. In addition to regulating how much food they eat, we must provide our cats with other interesting things to do. (See topics in “*environmental enrichment*”)

Select a quality cat food. There are endless choices and opinions of cat foods. And the debate about what cat foods are good and which ones are not is a subject for another discussion. In a nutshell: **Pick a good quality canned diet that is nutritionally complete.** Many canned diets are meant to be fed only as “treats” on an occasional basis. Read labels to make sure the diet you choose is a nutritionally complete meal. What is important for everyone to know is that the pet industry has virtually no oversight, no regulations and no product labeling laws. The more research you do the more you will find opinions, blogs, internet ratings that have hidden agendas, mostly generated by competitor pet food manufacturers. Our advice: ask your veterinarian which brands are recommended. To make it easy and ensure that your cat ends up with a consistent, quality product that is nutritionally complete, we recommend foods by *Hills Science Diet* or by the *IAMS Company*.

Dry food and dental health: Does dry food make for healthier teeth? Recent research suggests that this is not as important as we used to believe. The best way to maintain dental health in pets is to clean their teeth at home. (Ask us for a demonstration). We believe that the general health benefits from canned foods outweigh the dental advantage of dry foods.

Raw meat diets: We do not recommend raw meat diets, because raw meat can so easily transmit parasites and dangerous bacteria to pets and people. Certainly the philosophy of raw diets, when properly prepared, is ideal in terms of species-specific feeding. However, it can be very difficult to produce a consistently wholesome and safe product.



Homemade diets: We do not recommend homemade diets because it can be very difficult to make nutritionally complete meal on a consistent basis. Vitamins, minerals, fatty acids and micronutrients are difficult to balance and add to the food in a palatable way. However, for cat aficionados who want to make their own food look at: www.catinfo.org.

It can be a challenge to get a dry food addict to eat canned food. A gradual, patient, approach is needed. Please ask us for advice on how to transition your cat.

It is important to feed the correct amount of calories. Feeding too little calories can be just as harmful as feeding too many. Remember, canned cat food is mostly water, so your cat may actually eat a larger volume. Please check the cat food manufacturer’s website for feeding instructions or ask us for advice.