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## What's New in Cat Nutrition?

By [Dr. Hermann](#)

Recent research has changed the recommendations for the nutrition in cats. Some of the recent discoveries include:

- The GI tract in a cat is shorter compared to dogs (when comparing similar body size), thus limiting the ability to absorb certain nutrients
- Cats lack certain enzymes that are needed to digest carbohydrates efficiently
- Cats require a higher amount of protein in their diet, especially as they age
- In order to digest protein in the diet efficiently, a healthy amount of acids are required in the stomach
- The healthy GI flora (bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract) require soluble fiber and prebiotics (not grains)
- The bad bacteria in the GI tract feed on carbohydrates and poorly digestible proteins



### The problem:

- Dry cat foods use plant material to make the pellet thus increasing the amount of carbohydrates in the diet. Cats require less than 15% carbohydrates but the dry foods can contain up to 65% carbohydrates!
- Cats require a highly digestible protein in their diet, preferably greater than 85%. Most cat foods fall short of that goal, canned food comes closest.

- The cells in the cat's colon obtain some of its nutrition from the soluble fiber that the cat consumes in the diet. Most cat foods do not contain high enough soluble fiber thus putting some cats at risk for unhealthy colon cells and poor absorption of nutrients.
- Cats tend to be creatures of habit that means that once a cat is used to a certain food type, texture or flavor, it can be hard to change their diet later in life.
- Cats are obligate protein eaters so adding other foods to their diet that we may think is healthy from our table, could have serious consequences for the cat's GI track.
- Cats' do not do well with free feeding in most cases. The tendency to over eat plus a sedentary life-style is a recipe for cats to become overweight which places them in a higher risk for diabetes, urinary tract infections, arthritis, and heart disease, just to name a few.

### **The result:**

A diet that contains high carbohydrates along with either a low or poorly digestible protein can lead to poorly digested nutrients that tend to feed the bad bacteria in the intestinal track. As a result, inflammation occurs in the lining of the intestines. This inflammation enhances the poor digestion of the food even more. The final effect is a cycle of poorly digested food that feeds the bad bacteria and creates more intestinal inflammation. Eventually this cycle will lead to a condition called inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). IBD eventually can place the cat at risk for causing pancreas and/or liver issues as well as intestinal lymphoma (a form of cancer). Clinically, we may see a cat that has chronic soft/smelly stools or diarrhea, vomiting, weight loss, pancreatitis, diabetes, liver disease, or intestinal lymphoma.

Research has shown that the above process from the initial irritation of the GI tract to the final pancreas/liver or lymphoma can take many years. Usually this process begins early in life (around 2 years of age) and may not even display any clinical signs until the cat is 8 to 10 years of age. Most certainly, poor nutrition can be a potential silent killer.

### **The answer:**

Unfortunately, there is no single best food available for cats that meet all of these requirements but many food manufactures are starting to address these

issues. Canned food is low in the carbohydrates and contains higher protein, but the amount of soluble fiber can be an issue. Dry food is too high in carbohydrates and tend to have less than optimal digestible protein and higher insoluble fiber. Raw meat diets tend to have the high digestible protein but they are deficient in significant nutrients that the cat requires unless a balanced supplement is given. Further, raw meat diets contain the risk for parasites in the cat as well as potential Salmonella and E. coli exposure to humans.

Perhaps the best diet might be a 'mouse in a can'. The mouse contains high digestible protein, more soluble fiber and very low carbohydrates. Further, if you could have a mouse in a can, when you open the can, the mouse would jump out and the cat would have to chase it down, thus providing the exercise as well!



Obviously a mouse in a can is not practical, so the researchers are recommending the following:

- Canned diet that is measured to the specific needs of your cat along with a small amount of dry food.
- The food should **not** be given free-choice but on a regular schedule.
- Increase the exercise of your cat to keep his/her weight at an optimal level.
- Regular wellness exams by your veterinarian to monitor your cat's health and be able to provide the best suggestions for your cat's particular dietary needs as your pet ages.

#### **Other concerns:**

*Will canned cat food cause more dental disease?*

Not really, in fact, because of the low carbohydrates in the canned food, there are less sugars for the bacterial in the mouth to feed on. Some cats actually have better teeth when eating canned food.

*Since canned food contains more fat, will my cat get overweight?*

Because of the way cats metabolize the carbohydrates, we tend to see more overweight cats on dry food. Many have lost weight when on a canned diet.

*Are there other benefits to canned food?*

Cats by nature are desert animals thus they are very good at recycling water in their kidneys, as a result, some cats tend not to drink as much water as they should. Cats that do not drink enough water develop a very concentrated urine which can lead to irritation in the bladder. This irritation can potentially lead to a condition called Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease (FLUTD). We find that when cats consume canned food, they are consuming more moisture as well. In some cases, veterinarians may recommend to the owner to add water to the canned diet for those at-risk cats to help reduce the risk of FLUTD.

### **So what is next?**

See your veterinarian and discuss what the best nutrition for your cat is. Your veterinarian is the absolute best resource to determine the best food and amount for your particular cat's needs at his or her stage in life. Just like us humans, cats are not all put together the same, so tailoring the best diet for your cat to ensure his or her optimal quality of life can only come from the recommendations of your veterinarian.

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