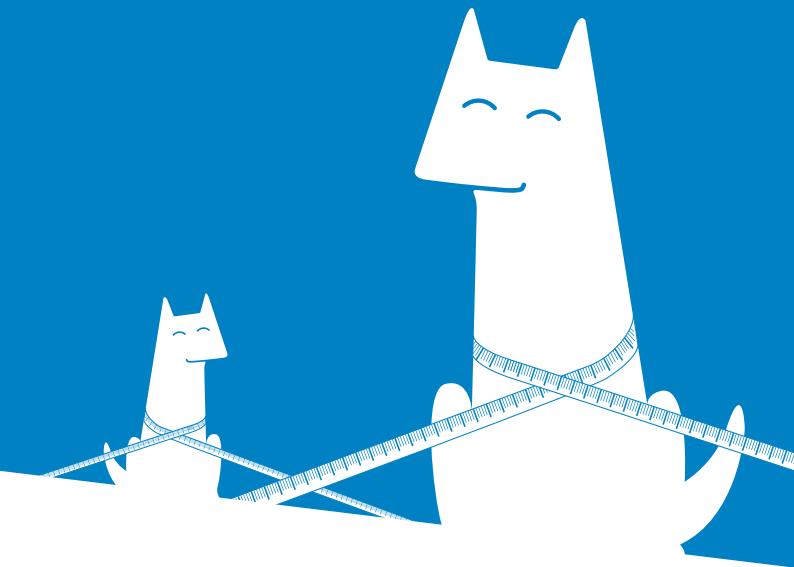


Feeding and obesity



CATS PROTECTION
ESSENTIAL GUIDE 4



Go into your local pet shop or supermarket and you'll be faced with a whole aisle full of cat food! With so many different types and brands out there the choice can be overwhelming. So, how do you know which one to feed to your cat?

A balanced diet

Like humans, cats need a balanced diet with the right amount of nutrients, so it's best to stick to a reputable pet food which includes everything cats need to stay fit and healthy.

Commercial pet food is classified as either complete or complementary:

- complete foods provide all the necessary nutrients in the right balance so that no other food needs to be added
- complementary foods must be combined with other foods to provide a complete balance of nutrients
- whichever food you choose, remember cats always need fresh water, which should be changed daily

Cats have a higher protein requirement than many other mammals and so must eat meat to satisfy their needs. However, there is no need to feed your cat an entirely homemade or fresh food diet, unless this is recommended by your vet for medical reasons. It's very difficult to provide the right range and balance of proteins, vitamins and minerals that cats need to thrive. An unbalanced diet can cause growth problems and/or medical conditions.

If you are feeding your cat a reputable complete cat food, there is no need to give your cat a vitamin supplement unless advised by your vet. It may cause a dietary imbalance which could be harmful.

If you have adopted a cat it's wise to keep them on the same food that they have been used to as a sudden change of diet can cause an upset stomach. If you would like to change your cat's diet you can slowly introduce the new food by mixing it with the old food over a period of a week or more.

Remember, your cat...

- is an obligate carnivore and must have amino acids such as taurine that can only be found in meat, so they cannot be a vegetarian
- should not be fed dog food. The balance of ingredients are not suitable for cats' digestive systems and will not provide your cat with all the nutrients they need
- likes to eat, drink and toilet in different places. In an evolutionary sense this allows them to avoid water that may be contaminated with waste from prey, so move the water bowl to a site away from the food bowl and move the litter tray away from both the food and water bowls
- prefers to eat away from other cats.

Reduce any potential competition for food between cats by feeding them in different areas of the house



Wet or dry food?

You can feed your cat wet or dry food, or a mixture of both.

Wet foods

These are normally available in tins or pouches. Wet food is soft and there are many different flavours to choose from. You may find it more appealing to a fussy eater.

Dry foods

These can be a practical choice for many owners as they can be left out all day for your cat to nibble on and can be beneficial for the teeth and gums. Using feeding balls to give some, or all, of your cat's daily dry food ration can help to lessen the unnatural boredom that can result from cats eating food from bowls and provides some exercise. However, if your cat has a medical condition requiring increased water intake, such as urinary problems, your vet may suggest avoiding dry food and feeding only wet food.

How much?

This depends on the type of food you give your cat, their size, age and their level of activity. Follow the advice given on the food packet for the daily amount and then monitor your cat's weight periodically. It is very important to avoid overfeeding.

Remember, owners have a legal duty of care to provide for their cat's needs, which includes the need for an appropriate diet including fresh water – see *Cats Protection's Essential Guide: Cats and the law*.

How often?

Cats have evolved to eat little and often – in the wild a cat would eat around 10-12 small meals throughout the day. Pet cats will often prefer the same, although their feeding behaviour is influenced by their environment and previous experiences. Fresh wet food should be replaced at least twice daily and dry food at least once daily. Once neutered, cats typically have reduced energy needs, so consider cutting down their daily amount accordingly.

Hunting

Although you provide your cat with food, they will still need to exhibit hunting behaviour. Cats share common ancestry with the African wildcat which spends many hours actively hunting prey, using frequent short bursts of energy followed by periods of rest. The drive to hunt is not triggered by hunger – since not every hunting expedition is successful, it wouldn't make sense to risk waiting until hunger strikes before seeking prey.

Each part of the hunting activity – the stalk, pounce, play and kill – releases feel-good hormones called endorphins. It is important that your pet cat is still given frequent opportunities to play and exhibit this hunting behaviour to keep them mentally stimulated. Cats that have free access to the outdoors will still often engage in hunting activity – playing with fallen leaves or grass blowing in the wind if there is no access to prey – even though they also get fed a bowl of food. Encouraging play with fishing rod toys and other toys is a great outlet for this activity and will keep your cat happy and reduce stress. For more information see Cats Protection's [Essential Guides: Understanding your cat's behaviour](#) and [Caring for your cat](#).

Obesity

It is important that you manage your cat's weight by ensuring they are not overfed and have plenty of opportunities to exercise. Prevention is better than cure. A cat that has been overweight before is more prone to weight gain. You should be able to feel your cat's ribs easily when you stroke their body lightly and you should clearly see a waistline when you look at them from above.

Overweight cats are usually defined as being greater than 15 per cent over their ideal body weight, while the term obese is used for cats that are 30 per cent above their ideal weight. Cats under two years of age are less likely to gain weight. Between two and 10 years, cats use up less energy so are more at risk of becoming overweight. Senior and geriatric cats – aged 12 years and over – have a tendency to be underweight.

It is difficult to feel an obese cat's ribs because they will be covered by a layer of fat. There is often a drooping 'skirt' underneath the cat and when looked at from above, the back will look broad or flat with no obvious waist. Many overweight or obese cats have a poor quality of life. Their weight can restrict their ability to groom properly. They can also suffer with joint problems and have an increased risk of developing weight-related diseases such as diabetes mellitus and urinary infections. In severe cases, owners can actually kill their cat with kindness by overfeeding.

If your cat is overweight, a vet can help you find an appropriate feeding regime which will ensure that they get the right amount of food without being overfed. It is a good idea to weigh food out daily. Many dry foods come with calibrated scoops, but it is easy to overfill these. Remember that any

treats will add calories onto the daily ration. If you like to give your cat treats throughout the day, it is much better to put a small amount of the daily portion aside so that you don't increase the total amount of food eaten throughout the day.

Overweight cats should never be starved or put on a 'crash diet' as any period of no food can very quickly be harmful. A gradual, steady decrease in bodyweight is ideal – it may take up to a year for a severely overweight cat to reach its ideal body condition.

It can be difficult to manage a cat's weight in multi-cat households – any household with more than one cat. Some cats will happily finish anything the others do not appear to want. Feeding the overweight cat in a separate room can give the other cats in the household some time to eat. Any leftover food should be removed before the overweight cat is let out of the room so that it can't be finished off.

Providing the overweight cat with a toy that slowly releases food can help to increase the amount of time they spend eating and give them a little exercise. Alternatively, food can be placed inside cardboard boxes with holes cut in the side that are large enough for all cats to fit through except for the overweight cat – this allows the other cats in the house to eat whenever they wish. They will need to be shown the new location of their food. Microchip pet feeders are available that restrict access to food to specific cats – linked to their unique microchips.

Cats living in the wild are generally solitary and aren't used to living in social groups like dogs, so it can be stressful for cats to live together, even if they are siblings. Long term stress in

some cats can lead to them overeating, while others may lose weight. For more information on multi-cat households, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Cats living together*.

It is hard to notice weight loss or weight gain in a cat that you see every day so it is a good idea to weigh your cat regularly. Most cats will not sit still on a scale, so weigh a carrying box or yourself, then weigh your cat in the box or while you are holding it and subtract the excess weight to get that of the cat. Many vet practices offer weight clinics, where they can regularly weigh your cat using special pet weighing scales.

Because exercise is such an important part of weight control, indoor cats are particularly prone to obesity and it can be a manifestation of stress. It can be useful to look at your obese cat's lifestyle, its environment and placement of resources, as well as its diet. For more information, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guides: Caring for your cat* and *Indoor and outdoor cats*.

Treats

Cats often appreciate attention or playtime with their owner – more than food treats – and it can strengthen your bond with your cat. If you are giving a cat a food treat, remember to limit the amount given so your cat doesn't gain weight. It is best to stick to cat food treats rather than leftovers or raw meat, although a little bit of well-cooked fresh chicken or fish is okay. Feeding liver can cause serious illness in cats if given too frequently due to its high vitamin A content and it should not be given more than once weekly.

And to drink...

Make sure your cat has fresh water available at all times:

- cats that are fed an entirely dry diet tend to drink more water
- wet food is 90 per cent water so cats require little in addition to this but always offer plenty
- some cats prefer to drink from puddles or ponds
 - this is normal
- if your cat's drinking habits change and they noticeably drink more or less, this may be an early indication of a medical problem, so contact your vet
- avoid giving your cat cow's milk – around a third of cats can't tolerate it and it can lead to sickness and diarrhoea
- specially formulated milk for cats is available but this should only be given as an occasional treat as it very high in calories
 - it should never be given instead of water

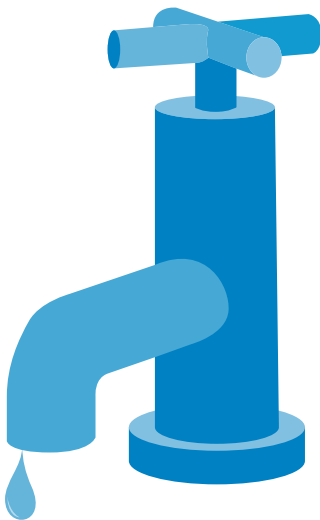
Some cats benefit from being encouraged to drink more, particularly those suffering from conditions of the urinary tract, such as cystitis or kidney disease. This should be discussed with your vet.

To encourage cats to drink more:

- avoid plastic containers – use glass, ceramic or metal instead. Cats are very sensitive to taste and plastic can taint the water
- offer a large, shallow water bowl with a large surface area. Cats do not like their shadow blocking the view of the surface of the water when they go to drink and some don't like their whiskers touching the sides of the bowl

- place some extra 'cat use only' glasses on high up surfaces if you find your cat likes helping themselves to your glass of water. Ensure these are sturdy so the cat cannot knock them over
- try offering a water fountain – cats often prefer moving water
- offer filtered water – some cats are sensitive to the chlorine in the water
- ensure the water bowl is sited in a location acceptable to the cat. Cats need to be able to access their water without having to pass objects that they perceive to be threatening, such as other cats or dogs. Provide more than one bowl in different locations throughout the house and avoid placing the water right next to their food

Cats that usually drink from a water source outside may find that this source is inaccessible one day, so although some cats seem not to drink the water that is provided, it is important that fresh water is always available.



Why isn't my cat eating?

Many owners report that their cat is fussy. However, sometimes we are too quick to offer the cat something else, often more palatable, if they appear disinterested in the food presented. The cat then learns over time that if they hold off, they may be offered something more tempting.

While some cats are fussier than others, cats may stop eating because of stress or illness and should be checked by a vet. Odour, texture and temperature of food are important factors for cats and can be manipulated to tempt the problem feeder or sick cat. To encourage a cat to eat, try:

- offering a range of different wet and dry foods at different times – making sure you introduce new foods slowly
- giving wet food at room temperature rather than straight from the fridge – in general, cats prefer this
- offering regular small amounts of food rather than a large bowl. This can be less overwhelming and means that the food is always fresh
- offering food with a strong odour. Warming food up a little will increase the aroma. Make sure it's not too hot, body temperature is ideal
- adding a drop of a yeast extract spread or fish oil or a small amount of kitten food to the meal. This can make it more appetising but should be regulated and not performed on a long term basis. Ask your vet if this is suitable for your cat
- sitting down with your cat or hand feeding can encourage eating to start. Once a cat starts to eat it can induce an appetite
- a sick cat may need to be given a special diet by the vet who can advise on how best to tempt the cat

While cooked fish or chicken is sometimes used to stimulate a cat's appetite, other human foods should be avoided. Food containing onions, or onion powder, can be potentially toxic and life threatening if ingested by a cat.

A familiar diet is preferred at times of stress, so ensure that an acceptable diet is available if your cat is placed in a different environment, such as in a cattery, to help avoid any refusal to eat or stomach upsets from a change of diet.

Time to see the vet...

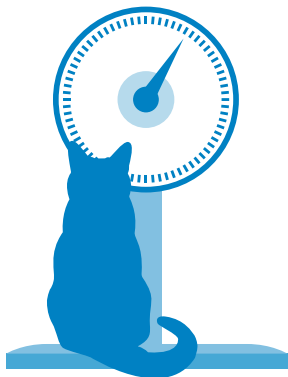
You should watch for changes in your cat's eating or drinking behaviour as they may indicate an underlying problem with their health. You should see your vet if your cat:

- normally eats well but suddenly stops
- has not eaten for 48 hours
- develops a ravenous appetite
- will only eat on one side of the mouth
- makes a grinding noise while eating
- starts drinking noticeably more than usual
- has unexplained weight loss
- is vomiting or has diarrhoea

Cats that don't eat, even for a few days, can develop a condition of the liver which in severe cases can be fatal. Regular eating is essential.

Special diets and life-stage feeding

Cats' dietary needs change according to their age and health and there are a range of specific foods available eg kitten, senior, indoor, sensitive or low calorie. A special diet may be prescribed by your vet if your cat has a health problem such as kidney disease or joint problems. This should be given as instructed, only to the cat it is prescribed to. If possible, it is preferable to introduce the new diet gradually while the cat still has access to its original diet.



It can be difficult to feed a prescription diet to a cat if you have other cats in the household. See the information on obesity above for some tips on how to feed cats different diets.

Pregnant cats and mums feeding kittens

Pregnant cats and those feeding kittens have increased nutritional requirements and need the same high-protein kitten food as weaned kittens. Give the pregnant cat unlimited access to kitten food and fresh drinking water. During pregnancy she is likely to eat only a little more than normal but when she is suckling kittens, she has to produce so much milk that she may eat double or triple her normal amount. For more advice, speak to your vet or contact Cats Protection's Helpline on 03000 12 12 12. For general information, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens*.

Kittens

Providing your cat with a balanced diet throughout her pregnancy and while she is suckling means she should be able to feed her kittens until they are weaned at six to eight weeks old. You can begin the weaning process by providing well-mashed kitten food from three to four weeks of age. If the litter is very large you may have to supplement their diet with specialised kitten milk at an earlier age. If the mum cannot feed her young or the kittens are orphaned, you will need to take over the feeding completely. If this is the case, contact your vet for advice or call the Cats Protection Helpline 03000 12 12 12. Kittens have small stomachs and high energy requirements, so need to be fed little and often. Their food should generally be checked and replaced four times daily.





Adults

A cat food classed as 'adult' is for cats from one to eight years of age. Cats tend to be fed once or twice a day but some will regulate their food intake throughout the day, so the daily ration can be left out for them, particularly if they are fed on dried food.

Senior cats

A cat food classed as 'senior' is for cats over eight years old. Cats experience changes as they get older and their nutritional requirements change with age. There are many foods aimed at senior cats which provide the different dietary requirements needed for their age, such as lower protein content and nutrients to promote optimum health.

Learn more about your cat online!

Take a look at our free interactive tool to help you understand cats' origins and their behaviour within our homes. <http://learnonline.cats.org.uk/content/ufo>

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For more information about Cats Protection or to make a donation, please visit www.cats.org.uk or phone our Helpline on 03000 12 12 12.

Reg Charity 203644 (England and Wales) and SC037711 (Scotland)

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