

Feeding and obesity

cats.org.uk



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 the choice can be overwhelming. So, how do you know which one to feed to your cat?

A balanced diet

Cats have a higher protein requirement than many other mammals. They require certain substances that can only be found naturally in meat. Therefore, feeding a meat-based diet is the safest way to meet a cat's dietary needs. They also need their diet to be balanced with the right amount of nutrients. As such it's best to stick to a reputable pet food which includes everything cats need to stay fit and healthy. Cats always need fresh water, which should be changed daily.

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

Good quality, commercially produced foods should provide your cat with everything they need to stay healthy. It is not recommended to try to make homemade meals for your cat unless advised 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 also 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 a carnivore and must have amino acids such as taurine that can only be found in meat, so they cannot be a vegetarian
- Cats should not be fed dog food. The balance of ingredients is not suitable for cats' digestive systems and will not provide your cat with all the nutrients they need
- Place your cat's food and water bowls away from each other (cats don't like their water contaminated by their food)

- Place your cat's litter tray as far away as possible from their food and water to avoid contamination
- Cats usually prefer to eat away from other cats. Reduce any potential competition for food between cats by feeding them in different areas of the house
- Older cats will benefit from having food offered in several places so they don't need to go so far to find food

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 that it's more appealing to a fussy eater.

Dry foods

Dry food has the advantage of being able to be left out all day, which can be useful for cats who prefer to graze. Using puzzle feeders to give some, or all, of your cat's daily dry food ration can make feeding time more exciting and encourages 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.

Cats can be offered a mix of both wet and dry food which has several benefits. Cats will be exposed to both textures, meaning if they need a specific diet in the future they will be more likely to accept it. They will get the benefits of higher moisture wet food, while also having a dry option to allow the use of puzzle feeders.

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.

How often?

Cats have evolved to eat little and often. In the wild a cat would eat around 10 to 12 small meals throughout the day, and pet cats will often prefer the same. Their feeding behaviour is also influenced by their environment and previous experiences. Fresh wet food should be given at least twice daily and dry food at least once daily.

Once neutered, cats typically have reduced energy needs. Consider cutting down their daily amount to prevent them from becoming overweight.

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. They use frequent short bursts of energy followed by periods of rest. The drive to hunt is not triggered by hunger. Not every hunting expedition is successful, so 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 natural hunting behaviour. It keeps them mentally stimulated. Cats that have free access to the outdoors will still often engage in hunting activity. They might play with fallen leaves or grass blowing in the wind if there is no access to prey. Encouraging play with fishing rod toys mimics stalking and pouncing behaviours and is a great outlet for this activity. Regular play will keep your cat happy and reduce stress. For more information see cats.org.uk/behaviour

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 often easier than the management of an overweight cat. A cat that has been overweight before is more prone to gain weight. 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 that are more than 15% over their ideal body weight
- Obese: cats that are more than 30% over their ideal body 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 11 years and older, may start to lose weight due to other health conditions. Weight changes should be checked by your vet.

It is difficult to feel an obese cat's ribs because they will be covered by a layer of fat. There is often a rounded, firm belly when looked at from above, the back will look broad or flat with no obvious waist.

Many overweight or obese cats have a poorer quality of life.

Their weight can restrict their ability to groom properly. They can also suffer with:

- joint problems
- an increased risk of developing weight-related diseases such as diabetes
- urinary infections

If your cat is overweight, your vet can help you find an appropriate feeding regime. This can ensure that they get the right amount of food without being overfed.

To ensure that you are not overfeeding your cat:

- weigh food out daily. Many dry foods come with calibrated scoops, but it is easy to overfill these
- when giving your cat treats reduce their daily portion of food accordingly. Treats do not contain the same balanced nutrition as daily cat food so we recommend that they don't replace too much of your cat's usual food

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 their ideal body condition.

Feeding more than one cat

It can be difficult to manage your cat's weight in a 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
- Remove any leftover food before the overweight cat is let out of the room so that leftovers can't be finished off
- 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
- Provide the overweight cat with a toy that slowly releases food. This can help to increase the amount of time they spend eating and give them a little exercise. Use some of their daily portion of food so they are not getting additional calories. Introduce this gradually to avoid frustration. 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. This means 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.org.uk/other-cats

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. Scales designed for pets can be purchased online; these will be more accurate than human scales. Cats may sit on a blanket or in a box upon these scales, the weight of this can then be deducted. Cats can also be trained to stand on the scales using positive rewards and treats. 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. Being overweight can be an indicator of stress. It can be useful to look at your obese cat's lifestyle, their environment and placement of essential items, as well as their diet.

For more information, see

cats.org.uk/home-and-environment

Treats

Cats often appreciate attention or playtime with you more than food treats, and it can strengthen your bond with your cat. If you are giving your 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. It has high vitamin A content and it should not be given more than once weekly.

Drinking

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% 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

- Don't give your cat cow's milk. Many cats can't tolerate it and it can lead to sickness and diarrhoea
- Specially-formulated milk for cats is available. This should only be given as an occasional treat as it is 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 or ceramic 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. Some don't like their whiskers touching the sides of the bowl
- if you find your cat likes helping themselves to your own glass of water place some extra 'cat-use only' glasses around the home. Ensure these are sturdy so the cat cannot knock them over
- try offering a water fountain as cats often prefer moving water

- offer filtered water. Some cats are sensitive to the chlorine in tap water
- ensure the water bowl is in a location acceptable to the cat. Cats need to be able to access their water without having to pass things 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
- on hot days place a few cubes of ice in their bowls
- cats that usually drink from a water source outside may find that this source is inaccessible one day. Even though they may not seem 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. What a cat prefers to eat will often depend on their early experiences of foods of different tastes and textures. It is important not to suddenly change their food with the expectation they will eat it. A gradual transition to a new food is normally more successful. Sometimes a cat will enjoy a new food for a short time and then reject it, other cats prefer having a different flavour offered every so often. It is important not to offer a treat each time your healthy cat seems disinterested in food.

This may cause them to learn they will be offered something more tempting if they don't eat their normal cat food.

While some cats are fussier than others, cats may stop eating because of stress or illness and should be checked by your vet. Odour, texture and temperature of food are important factors for cats and can be manipulated to tempt a fussy eater 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 given 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 your 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), garlic, chocolate and raisins can be potentially toxic and life threatening if eaten by a cat.

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

Time to see your 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 24 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 for example, 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 food allergies. 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 their 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.

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. For general information, see

cats.org.uk/pregnancy-and-kitten-care

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, please speak to your vet for further advice.

If the mum cannot feed her kittens or the kittens are orphaned, you will need to take over the feeding completely. If this is the case, contact your vet for advice. 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 generally for cats from one to eight years of age. Cats tend to be fed at least twice a day; it is natural for them to eat small meals regularly. Some cats will regulate their food intake throughout the day, so the daily ration can be left out for them, particularly if they are fed on dry 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. These include foods with lower protein content, and nutrients to promote optimum health.

Looking for cat advice?

The following vet-approved guides are available to download from

cats.org.uk/information-leaflets

Essential guides

Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour W84009

Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour W84010

Bringing your cat home W84002

Caring for your cat W84001

Caring for your kitten W84015

Cats and people W84014

Cats living together W84011

Elderly cats W84016

End-of-life, grief and loss W84007

Feeding and obesity W84004

Feral cats W84017

Indoor and outdoor cats W84012

Keeping your cat safe W84005

Microchipping W84008

Moving home W84003

Neutering W84006

Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens W84018

Veterinary guides

Arthritis W83201

Cat flu W83216

Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea W83218

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) W83209

Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) W83202

Fleas and other parasites W83215

Heart murmurs and heart disease W83211

Hyperthyroidism W83212

Infectious disease and vaccination W83217

Kidney or renal disease W83206

Skin disorders W83204

Teeth and oral health W83214

Please see cats.org.uk for more information on:

Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis

Cats and the law

Cats with disabilities

Diabetes

Feline asthma

Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)

Feline parvovirus (FPV)

Hypertension

You and your vet

For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to **cats.org.uk**



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