

Del Ray Animal Hospital
524 E. Mount Ida Ave.
Alexandria, VA 22301
(703) 739-0000
www.delrayanimalhospital.com

What Should I Feed My Cat?

WHAT SHOULD I FEED MY CAT?

If you are a cat owner, we would strongly recommend feeding mostly canned food to your pet. While it may be simpler to fill a bowl with dry food and leave it down for nibbling, feeding 2-3 discrete meals a day is much healthier for your cat. If you have just acquired a new kitten, it will be easy to start it on canned food. If you have an adult cat already accustomed to eating dry food, the transition may be a little more difficult and take more time, but it is worth it for a variety of health reasons. A little dry food can still be fed, especially if the pet needs to be left alone for longer periods like a weekend vacation; in this case it is probably useful to keep your cat's food preferences flexible. Please consult with your veterinarian if you would like to feed a prepared raw meat diet.

WHY CANNED FOOD?

Canned food, because of the way it is formulated and prepared, is much higher in protein and lower in carbohydrates than dry cat food, regardless of the "quality" of the brand. Obviously, it also has much higher moisture content. Recent research is making it clear that it is nutritionally dangerous to feed cats diets that are too high in carbohydrates. This is because cats are obligate carnivores - they are designed to acquire their nutrition from meat sources. When you think of a mouse, what is it made of? It is about 45% protein, 45% fat, and less than 5% carbohydrates. It also contains a lot of water. This is what we want to feed our cats. For years we have been feeding cats dry foods (in general 35-60% carbohydrates), primarily for convenience to the owner and because grain based carbohydrate ingredients are cheaper for manufacturers than quality meat ingredients. In fact cats lack the enzymes necessary to efficiently convert carbohydrates into energy for storage. They are very efficient at converting protein, however. If fed too many carbohydrates, the resulting glucose produced lingers in their blood stream for a prolonged period of time. It interferes with insulin production, lipid metabolism, and digestive system health. Cats also seem less satisfied by the calories they consume as carbohydrates. Their brains require protein by-products to get the message "I am full". So if fed high carbohydrate diets, they are more likely to overeat and not be satiated. Pet owners and veterinarians are now facing an epidemic of obesity and diabetes in cats that has emerged over the last 15 years because of these facts. Finally, cats are not big drinkers. While cats on dry diets will drink water, they generally take in about 1/3 less water than canned food eaters. This may well be contributing to the increased frequency of cats in our practice that suffer from urinary tract/renal disease and constipation.

Cats should be fed their canned food in 2 or 3 meals per day rather than free-choice feeding. This prevents their food from spoiling and makes it easier to feed controlled amounts, especially in the multi-cat household. It also promotes a healthier insulin and digestive enzyme response. Contrary to popular belief, cats are not designed to be “nibblers” and do not need a constantly available food source. It is ok to make one of these meals dry kibble if you desire to continue feeding some dry food.

HOW MUCH SHOULD I FEED MY CAT?

A good starting point is the idea that the average 10 pound cat should eat two 3 ounce cans of food per day. This is the smallest can of cat food routinely available. If you are feeding some dry food, offer ¼ cup dry and only one can of food per day to start. Obviously larger cats may need more and smaller cats less, but do not fool yourself into thinking that your cat is “big-boned”. It is the rare domestic cat who will exceed 15 pounds when at ideal body weight. All cats are individuals, of course with differing metabolisms, so if your cat is too thin on this regime, feed more. If he is too fat, feed less. If you can't tell which he is, ask us. Some cats (especially the young and active) will require DOUBLE this amount so be careful. Most cats regardless of size require at least this recommended amount.

Kittens, since they are growing, will have changing caloric needs. It is probably best to feed them a canned food designated as appropriate for kittens. In general there is not a substantial nutritional difference between most canned foods designated as “kitten” foods and many regular adult cat foods. Much adult food is labeled as appropriate for all life stages. Some kitten foods do have a higher fat content and therefore are more calorie-dense than the adult versions. This may be important mostly in the tiny kitten whose stomach cannot hold a large amount. Until they are spayed or neutered (5-6 months old), it is generally ok to feed kittens as much as they want to eat when food is offered in 3-4 discrete meals. Tiny kittens may need a 5th meal. If the owner of a young kitten is gone for long periods during the day, dry food may need to be left out until the kitten is a little older. Once neutered, your kitten's caloric needs will be less, and it is important to start controlling the volume of food fed to avoid excessive weight gain and to establish a lifetime of good feeding habits. Adult food should replace kitten food by 6 months of age.

WHAT BRANDS SHOULD I FEED?

First thing to know. Feeding ANY brand of canned cat food is probably preferable to feeding dry food, even a premium brand. As a general guideline, we would recommend feeding a canned diet whose first 2 or 3 listed ingredients are meats, meat broths and not by-products or grains. Finding these diets can be difficult in the supermarket, so again, we say that feeding ANY canned food is better than feeding dry. The VERY IMPORTANT EXCEPTION is canned foods with corn starch, food starch, or cellulose. Make sure you look for these on the label so as to avoid these high carbohydrate ingredients.

We would recommend that any diet chosen have received AAFCO (American Association of Feed Control Officials) approval; this should be noted on the label.

Human canned meats, particularly canned fishes, should not be fed to cats except in small amounts as a very occasional treat.

If you really want to maximize the health benefits, the diet chosen should mimic the 45% protein, 45% fat, and less than 10% carbohydrate of a mouse. Unfortunately pet food manufacturers are not yet required to put standardized nutritional content labels on their products, so comparing canned brands can be difficult. There is a website compiled by a variety of contributors that compares the nutrition of different brands on percentage-of-calories-fed basis, which may be useful, although there is no way to be sure the information is completely reliable and a lot of it is dated <http://beta.vin.com/WebLink.plx?URL=http://binkyspage.tripod.com/canfood.html>. More manufacturers are beginning to provide nutritional information in this percentage-of-calories-fed format to the public and there are formulas to figure this out yourself, but it takes time.

SO WHAT SHOULD I FEED MY CAT?

Canned food that does not contain corn starch, food starch, cellulose, or sodium benzoate. Ideally a premium brand with quality meat ingredients.

Small amounts of dry food, if desired.

Feed in 2-3 discrete meals per day.

Amount to start:

6oz (2 small cans) of canned food per day for your average 10lb cat.

OR ¼ cup dry and one 3 – 5.5oz (1 small OR medium can) per day.

Over time, increase or decrease daily amount to maintain ideal body weight.

Average energy requirement for a 10lb cat is 200 kcal/day.

CAT FOOD RECOMMENDATIONS

Primarily canned food

Small amounts of dry ok

Feed discrete meals 2-3 times per day

Very important to control amount. **DO NOT FREE FEED.**

Starting point for average 10lb cat: ¼ cup dry + ONE 3oz to 5.5oz canned food/day

Example: Feed ½ can am; ½ can dinner; 1/8 cup dry down at bedtime

Label should indicate that food meets AAFCO requirements.

Canned:

Look that the first 2 or 3 non-water ingredients are meat products, ideally not by-products.

Avoid products that contain corn starch, food starch, grains, or cellulose.

Avoid grains.

Minimize vegetables and fruits – if added look for low carbohydrate varieties.

Supermarket choices:

Fancy Feast “Feast” varieties; 9-Lives ground or flaked “entrée” varieties

Pet store choices:

Artemis, Avoderm Select Cuts varieties; Iams pate or entrée type varieties; Innova Evo 95% meat with low carbohydrate vegetables; Merrick; Organics by Nature; Wellness; Ziwi peak

Dry Food:

Ideally we would feed cats a lower-carbohydrate; higher-protein dry diet choice. However, this type of dry food is a little hard to find and the available brands are also VERY calorie-dense. Make sure to purchase the weight management version if available. You can feed only small amounts (a little less than 1/2 cup/day). If STRICT control of the amount is not possible, DO NOT FEED these diets. Instead opt for a higher carbohydrate lite or weight reduction diet – less than ideal but much lower in calories.

Low-carb/high protein diets:

Iams kitten, EVO dry, Precise Plus, Wellness Core, Orijen

Best choice: Purina Prescription DM – available through veterinarians

“Lite” dry diets:

Supermarket brand: Purina Weight Management or Iams Weight Control

Pet store choices: Avoderm APD Select Choice Lite or Wellness Healthy Weight

Calculating Carbohydrates from a Typical Pet Food Label

Example of food guaranteed analysis on a can of food:

Crude protein	Min 11%
Crude fat	Min 8%
Crude fiber	Max 1.5%
Moisture	Max 75%
Ash	Max 2.5%
Total	98%
Carbohydrates	2%

1. Figure out how much of the food is “dry matter”. In this example the food is 75% moisture(water) so it is 25% dry matter.
2. Divide the percent of carbohydrates by the percent of dry matter (2 divided by 25 = .08). The food in this example is 8% carbohydrates.

Look for foods especially in cats that have less than 10% dry matter carbohydrates