

Feeding Your Cat

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The High Points

1. Cats are carnivores and were never meant to eat high-carbohydrate diets
2. Commercial diet - especially dry diets - are too high in carbohydrates
3. Cats eating dry food are chronically dehydrated, and do not drink enough water to properly re-hydrate themselves
4. Dry diets are not that helpful in preventing dental disease
5. Experts are beginning to warn against feeding cats dry diets
6. If your cat is addicted to dry food or is picky, it is important to make changes carefully; don't let your cat stop eating in protest

Dry Food versus Wet Food

Dry pet food is a dehydrated and processed mix of grains, meats, and added vitamins and minerals. Dry foods are typically 30-60% carbohydrate in composition. What isn't well known among cat owners is that a requirement for carbohydrates has never been proven in cats (in contrast to dogs and people). Cats are carnivores, and in the wild eat nothing but meaty little rodents, bugs, birds and lizards. Our domesticated cats, on the other hand, are fed mixtures of meat and grain that produce a balanced diet over the long term. Many believe that those grains, aside from providing artificial balance, may be contributing to problems in the long run.

My cat is doing well on dry food. Why should I change?

Cats descend from desert animals that depended on their food to provide needed water. Their kidneys are adapted to this desert environment to conserve water and concentrate the wastes into the urine. When cats don't get enough water from food or additional water intake, some feel that cats spend much of their lives chronically dehydrated, which is not good for those kidneys or the rest of the body. One common problem that seems to respond to more water in the food is the frustrating FUS, now called FLUTD (lower urinary tract disease) or interstitial cystitis. Most doctors recommend feeding only canned food to these cats to increase water going into the body and out through the bladder. Also, many people tend to leave dry food out all the time, leaving their cats to free feed. As convenient as it may be, this is a potentially harmful practice for the cat! Most cats given food all the time eat more than they should, and this practice is behind a growing epidemic of obese cats. And no, it doesn't usually work to give them weight loss food free choice!

In addition, free feeding these high-carbohydrate meals has been suggested to contribute to the rising incidence of insulin resistance and diabetes in cats (Rand, 1998). Since this is a chronic, potentially dangerous problem that sometimes requires insulin injections for the rest of the cat's life, this is a major concern.

Finally, many people have difficulty medicating their cats, and are forced to mix it in food. It's much easier to mix medicine in canned food than in dry food. Cats who are addicted to dry food and won't eat any canned food (a common problem) are a special challenge to medicate!

Is canned food bad for my cat's teeth?

Scientific evidence does say that cats eating canned food have worse teeth than cats eating dry food; however, if dry food were all that effective, we would not be seeing the large number of dental diets recently introduced to the market. Saying that dry cat food is great at preventing dental disease is like

claiming that people could eat pretzels to maintain dental health! Teeth need proper nutrition (good quality diets increase all-around health and decrease susceptibility to gum disease), exercise (dental toys), and preventive treatment (brushing, where possible).

I can't get my cat to eat anything new.

Well, this is a problem. Cats easily become addicted to certain types of foods. If your cat is resistant to change, gradually try this technique:

1. If free feeding, slowly but surely reduce the availability of the food so that the cat is finishing what's offered during two meal times during the day. In other words, if food is usually available 24 hours daily, make it available for 4 hours in the morning and 4 hours at night, then 2 hours in the morning and 2 at night, and finally for only - 1 hour each time. Make sure to call your cat to meals so your cat doesn't miss the opportunity to learn that a meal is available during set times of the day.
2. Once you have turned your free feeder into a meal feeder, start mixing the new food into the old food. If your cat isn't interested, stop mixing the new food in and return to the old food.
3. Cut the amount of old food by 1/2 for ONLY 1 day. Your cat should become fairly hungry by the second day. This is when a cat is motivated to try the new taste, and you can once again begin mixing in the new food, very little at first and gradually increasing the amount.
4. If your cat does not eat the new mixture then, try cutting the amount of food offered for 3 to 5 days, then add some of the new food.

Remember that the object is to increase your cat's motivation to try something new without starving him or her - just inducing a mild feeling of hunger. DON'T let your cat lose weight, and don't push the issue too hard - some cats would rather get sick than switch. It's best to work with your veterinarian's scale during this process.

Advantages

The advantages to changing your cat's eating habits are many-fold. By switching from free feeding dry food to meal feeding using canned with some dry, you can more easily control the amount and kind of food your cat gets. If your cat refuses to switch easily using the technique above, go ahead and give in, but keep thinking about how your next cat will be fed!