**Diet & Nutrition**

A nutritious, balanced diet is essential to keeping your cat healthy. Learn what you should be feeding your cat at every stage of its life.

[Cat Food Basics: Dry vs. Wet, Diet, and Natural Foods](http://pets.webmd.com/cats/guide/cat-food-101-what-you-need-to-know-about-feeding-your-cat)

[Cats](http://pets.webmd.com/cats/default.htm) are carnivores. That's the most important thing to keep in mind when considering what to feed yours.

"Cats are… different from us and from dogs," says Louise Murray, DVM, vice president of the ASPCA's Bergh Memorial Animal Hospital in New York. "When it comes to nutrition, they are very inflexible, and owners must realize that."

Compared to what their owners should be eating, cats need to eat a lot of meat for protein and for fat.

"If we ate like cats, we'd have heart disease by age 20," Murray says. "They are not at all the same as humans and they are not little dogs."

She's explicit about this because it's not uncommon for owners to treat their cats the same way they treat dogs, which can eat a variety of foods and remain healthy.

[Common Cat Feeding Errors](http://pets.webmd.com/cats/guide/mistakes-people-make-feeding-cats)

We make plenty of mistakes feeding ourselves. We eat too much sugar and salt, we eat too little, then too much. With all the problems we have with our own diets, is it any wonder we make mistakes when feeding our cats?

So what errors are we making and why? Our cats can’t tell us, not with words. Sometimes we don’t know where we’ve gone wrong until our cat is sick.

### Cat Feeding Mistakes: Too Much Food

Probably the most common mistake people make when feeding cats is over-feeding, says Joe Bartges, DVM, PhD, DACVIM, DACVN, professor of medicine and nutrition, the Acree Endowed Chair of Small Animal Research, in the College of Veterinary Medicine, at the University of Tennessee. “[Obesity](http://pets.webmd.com/cats/guide/fat-cats-getting-tubby-tabby-back-into-shape) is the most common nutritional disease seen in cats.”

Although a pudgy kitty may look kind of cute, obesity is associated with cat health issues including [diabetes](http://pets.webmd.com/cats/guide/feline-diabetes-symptoms-treatments-prevention-diet), arthritis , and urinary tract disease. In fact, Bartges tells WebMD that cats may suffer from something similar to that very human condition, metabolic syndrome.

It’s not necessarily that we’re intentionally giving our cats more food than they need, says Linda P. Case, MS, author of *The Cat: Its* [*Behavior*](http://pets.webmd.com/cats/guide/aging-cat-behavior)*, Nutrition, and Health.* It’s that our kitties “are more sedentary, as compared to the days when they were barn cats and more active. They're little couch potatoes now, their nutrition needs are much lower, so it's easy to overfeed them.”

So how much food does your cat need? That’s a question best answered by a professional, though recommendations range between 24 to 35 calories a day per pound, to keep cats at a normal, healthy weight.

[Feeding Your Adult Cat](http://pets.webmd.com/cats/guide/feeding-your-adult-cat-what-you-need-to-know)

Jennifer Larsen, DVM, PhD is a nutritional consultant and assistant professor of clinical nutrition at the William R. Pritchard Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital at UC Davis in California. Although manufacturer reputation is one reliable indicator of the quality of adult cat food, she says the American Association of Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) provides some added assurance of sound nutrition. You can check for the AAFCO statement on your cat’s food label.  
  
AAFCO uses two methods to evaluate the nutritional adequacy of adult cat foods: formulation and feeding test.

The formulation method involves doing a nutritional analysis of ingredients and comparing it with AAFCO nutrient profiles for a cat’s particular life stage. “That diet doesn’t have to be fed to any live animal before it’s sold,” Larsen says.

The feeding test method evaluates the digestibility and absorption of nutrients in live animals. “I strongly prefer foods that have been through AAFCO feeding tests,” Larsen says.

[Vitamins and Supplements for Cats](http://pets.webmd.com/cats/guide/cat-vitamins-and-supplements-do-they-work)

Supplements may be recommended if your cat is sick.

“There are some circumstances where a cat has an underlying condition that may warrant a supplement, but many supplements are untested and unproven in veterinary medicine. The key point is that most cats consuming a complete and balanced diet probably have a better balanced diet than most humans,” says Sherry Sanderson, DVM, PhD, of the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine.

Supplements are meant to correct deficiencies.

For example, your cat may need a supplement if she has a medical condition that makes her unable to absorb a particular nutrient. Small intestinal disease can cause an inability to absorb the B vitamins folate and cobalamine. In this case, the cat would require injections of those two supplements, as oral supplements won’t be absorbed either.

Cats that are pregnant and nursing may develop nutritional deficiencies that require supplementation, particularly if the cat becomes pregnant before age 10-12 months, Cruz says. Your vet can direct you to the appropriate product.

[Tips for Reading Cat Food Labels](http://pets.webmd.com/cats/guide/how-to-read-cat-food-labels)

* **Product name:** What kind of cat food is it? The product name usually highlights a key ingredient, but not always.
* **Net weight:** How much is in the container?
* **Statement of purpose or intent:** Somewhere on the package, it must say that this food is specifically for [cats](http://pets.webmd.com/cats/default.htm). This sounds like a no-brainer, but cats have very particular nutritional needs that demand they have certain things in their diet.
* **Ingredient list:** By law, ingredients must be listed in decreasing order according to weight. But keep in mind, moisture content affects weight. So ingredients that are moisture-heavy, such as chicken or lamb, are listed higher on the ingredient list than the same ingredient that is added in a dry form.
* **Guaranteed analysis:** States the minimum or maximum amount of certain nutrients, including protein, fat, and fiber. Nutrients are different from ingredients.
* **Feeding directions:** Explains how to feed the product to the cat. Such directions are to be considered general guidelines, not rules. Ask your veterinarian for specific instructions.
* **Nutritional adequacy statement:** This tells you for which specific lifestyle and age of cat the food is intended. For example, is it for growing kitties or full-grown felines?
* **Statement of responsibility:** Lists the company responsible for making the product and how you can contact them.