



The modern domestic 'moggie' is descended from wild cats that hunted for their living in the desert regions of North Africa and the Middle East. Although most pet cats are now fed entirely on tinned or packaged food, their nutritional requirements are exactly the same as their ancestors' centuries ago. So to stay healthy, a domestic cat must receive a balanced diet containing all the nutrients that would be found in the natural diet of a hunting cat.

What is so special about a cat's diet?

Cats differ from dogs and many other animals in being completely dependent on meat. Dogs can survive happily on an almost vegetarian diet that would make your cat very ill. A cat needs a high protein diet with components that are only found in animal tissue. Two of the building blocks of proteins the amino acids taurine and arginine, are rarely found in plant material. Your cat cannot manufacture its own taurine or arginine and has to get them from animal tissue. Your cat also needs vitamin A and a compound called arachidonic acid that can only be found in meat.

What makes up a balanced diet?

Your cat also needs a balance of other nutrients. Many of these are found in tissues forming part of the natural diet like bone and skin, so a diet of lean steak will not give your cat everything it needs. Most of these ingredients are either present in, or added to, commercially prepared cat foods. Animal fat is important both as an energy source and because it contains essential vitamins like vitamin A. Fat also gives flavour and texture to the food. The carbohydrates used for energy by humans and other animals are less important for cats because they use proteins for the same purpose. Indeed, a diet containing too much carbohydrate is likely to give a cat an upset stomach.

Is milk necessary for good health?

It is a myth that cats need to be given milk. Milk is certainly a good source of calcium for building bones but calcium is usually found in sufficient quantities in commercially prepared pet foods. As kittens are weaned they lose the ability to digest lactose, a sugar found in cow's milk. Too much milk may therefore give an adult cat diarrhoea. Water is the best thing for your cat to drink. As the cat is still, at heart, a desert animal it can survive on less water than many other animals. But it does need a regular supply of clean fresh water, particularly if it is being fed dried food. Canned food is threequarters water so cats fed on a moist diet may not be seen drinking.

What if my cat loses its appetite?

Anyone who has ever looked after a cat will know that they are very particular about their food. They all have individual preferences about which types of food they enjoy - cats often seem to enjoy a varied diet but will starve themselves rather than eat a food they do not like. Ill health or anxiety can also put a cat off its food.

It may be possible to persuade a cat to eat by warming up the food to about 35°C, the temperature of freshly killed live prey (another option is to feed a powerful smelling and tasty food such as tinned fish or oxtail soup). Uneaten moist or canned food should be removed after about 20 minutes as stale food smells will reduce a cat's appetite even further. If your cat turns its nose up at an unfamiliar food there may be a good reason, cats appear to know instinctively when a food is lacking in essential nutrients.

Is obesity a problem in cats?

Generally cats are able to regulate the amount of food they eat and it is uncommon for them to become too fat (obese). However, if large quantities of tasty food are always available they may start to overeat and older, neutered cats that spend most of their time indoors are most susceptible. Weigh your cat regularly to make sure it is not gaining or losing weight and adjust the amount of food accordingly.

To weigh your cat first get onto the scales yourself and record your weight, then pick up your cat and record the weight of both of you, finally deduct your weight from the second reading to find how much your cat weighs. Alternatively cats can be weighed in a carrying basket but remember to allow for the weight of the basket when calculating its weight. If your cat needs to lose weight your vet will be able to recommend a special low calorie diet but do not attempt to put your cat on a 'crash diet' as this could be very damaging



to its health.

Do all cats need the same food?

There are several stages during your cat's life when its food needs are greatly different from normal. These include:

- **Pregnancy** - A pregnant cat will need much larger amounts of food to support its unborn kittens. During the final stages of pregnancy the queen (mother cat) may need double her normal quantity of food. However the pressure of the growing kittens in her belly may restrict her ability to eat large meals. Feed your cat more frequently or get a high energy diet especially formulated for pregnant cats. Your vet will be able to advise you on this. When your queen is producing milk for her kittens (lactation) her nutritional requirements may increase even further.
- **Kittenhood** - During their first few months kittens will grow exceptionally fast. This puts a big strain on the mother cat and the kittens should be weaned on to solid food as soon as possible. Try giving some solid food at three weeks and gradually giving more until they eat only solid food at about eight weeks old. The first food should be soft and easily digestible so dry food should be soaked in water or kitten milk. A kitten's stomach is small so it cannot eat large volumes in one go. A kitten should be fed about five times a day at eight weeks and the frequency of meals can be gradually reduced to two a day when it reaches six months old. Your vet may recommend putting your kitten on a specially formulated high energy diet to guarantee that it gets the right balance of nutrients needed for growth.
- **Old age** - As a cat becomes less active with age it may use up less energy but be careful about reducing its food intake too much. Older cats are also less efficient at digesting their food so they may need to eat relatively more food to absorb all the nutrients they need. There are conveniently prepared special diets available for the older cat that can be obtained from your vet.

What is the best diet for my cat?

There is a wide range of commercially prepared foods to suit your cat's needs. However, if you see an unfamiliar brand in the shops, be cautious, especially if it is one of the cheaper foods. As in all things quality comes at a price, and a cheaper brand will often contain inferior ingredients. The well known brands are usually formulated to give your cat everything it needs and have been tested to prove that they will be enjoyed by most cats. Your vet or veterinary nurse will be able to give you impartial and well-informed advice on feeding your pets.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact Unicorn Vets on 023 8034 3434 and we will be happy to advise you.