

## Nutritional Balance for Your Cat -Pat Hennessy

There are a variety of diets on the market for feeding your feline companion. Not all ingredients are the same. Not only do you need to read your food labels to scrutinize the ingredients, you also need to understand the food processing for your feline's kibble. As we have become more concerned about the food we put into our bodies, we should be equally as concerned about the food that our companion animals consume.

The increase in pet health issues (obesity, allergies, skin problems, etc.), could be contributed to the contents of commercially manufactured cat food. Not all proteins are created equal (real meat vs. meat by-products and meat meal). Meat by-products may include necks, feet, entrails, tissues that could be contaminated. Meat-meal and poultry-meal may also contain low grade quality scraps and by-products vs. chicken-meal or salmon-meal, where the whole meat source is listed instead of the generic (meat or poultry). It is always best to select foods where the meats are named individually, such as chicken, mackerel, turkey, salmon, etc., over generic meat wording or meals, due to the quality of the ingredients and the nature in which "meal" is created (through a rendering process).

A lot of people are turning toward fresh meat diets for their pets vs. standard dry kibble. Fresh meats provide enzymes and nutrients that are lost during the processing required to make dry kibble; nutrients that your cat may be lacking if not obtained from another source. Dry kibble is generally baked at high temperatures which destroy the enzymes, vitamins, amino acids and other nutrients. If you must feed dry kibble look for manufacturers that make their foods in small batches using a slow cooking/low heat process to minimize the nutrient loss, as well as adding appropriate supplements into the food such as vitamins, minerals, omega fatty acids, probiotics, flaxseed, etc. If your cat has a need for additional supplementation, be aware that the amount of that supplement found in dry cat food is not sufficient to be therapeutic. Talk with your veterinarian about a good quality supplement.

Most commercial foods are higher in grain content than in proteins and essentially are protein flavored cereals. Like proteins, not all grains are created equal either. It is best to avoid grains altogether, due to pesticide use and genetically modified (GMO) content. Grains in manufactured pet foods are highly processed, often consist of hulls and shafts, and provide no nutritional value. Grains are used as filler to save costs. When it comes to our cats, they are less tolerant of grains, than their canine counterparts, and have a higher requirement for protein.<sup>1</sup> Cats get certain key nutrients from meat. Diets that fail to provide the amino acids needed for proper feline health and are too high in carbohydrates, are often manifested in health issues such as diabetes, liver and heart issues, or skin irritations, to name a few. This applies to grain and grain-free diets (many grain-free diets are too heavy on the non-grain fillers (aka starch). Added supplements are not as good as the true protein source because most often the formulations cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> Marla McGeorge, a cat specialist at Portland, Oregon's Best Friends Veterinary Medical Center (quoted in *Scientific American*)

absorbed by the cat's body. The closer the diet is to a true protein source, the better your cat will thrive.

You need to be cautious of the term "all natural" or "preservative free". There are no food standards for them. There is more reliability for the term "organic", and the USDA is responsible for maintaining government standards on it. The best thing to do is to read labels and look at ingredients for quality and content.

You also need to beware of chemical additives to your cat's food. If the source protein is not organic, it is highly likely to have been injected with hormones and antibiotics. There are studies showing in both humans and animals who ingest proteins, where the protein source contained supplied antibiotics, the human or animal became more resistant to the future use of antibiotics and less resistant to bacterial strains in the environment. Additionally, you need to watch for preservatives such as butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA), butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT), and ethoxyquin as well as artificial colors and flavors, and chemicals such as propylene glycol (used to keep "chewy" foods moist). These preservatives have been blamed for cancer, kidney & pancreatic disease, blindness, and immunodeficiency, which lead to allergies, hair loss and other illnesses. Studies were conducted by the Pet Food Institute and Monsanto (now Bayer - ethoxyquin manufacturer) to determine what levels of artificial preservatives are safe. This is an example of the fox guarding the hen house. The FDA also requested that the artificial preservative manufacturers lower the maximum levels from 150 parts per million (ppm) to 75 ppm.<sup>2</sup>

Kibble can be naturally preserved with tocopherols (Vitamin E), ascorbic acid (Vitamin C), or by using oxygen barrier packaging. If you choose to go with naturally preserved cat food, then your cat must consume all of the food within 4-6 months of the manufacturer's date. If you cannot find or interpret the date, call the manufacturer. Also be aware that high levels of Vitamin E can be toxic and has shown up in some grain-free foods (and on the pet food recall list).

Sweeteners are another item to avoid in dog or cat food. It may be listed in the form of corn syrup, sucrose or ammoniated glycyrrhizin. They are added to make the food more palatable.<sup>3</sup> Sweeteners are not something that should be part of your pet's diet. It is not necessary and can encourage conditions such as diabetes.

Make sure you consistently observe your cat. His diet will be reflected in his coat, skin and energy level, as well as the presence (or absence) of diarrhea, constipation, vomiting, freshness of breath and potentially behavior problems. There are links to behavioral issues due to nutritional deficiencies, that are shown to be decreased or eliminated when the cat is supplied a nutritionally balanced diet.

The alternative to kibble is fresh food (either raw or lightly cooked), and preferably organic. There are manufacturers who supply prepared raw diets (frozen and

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Lisa Freeman, DVM veterinary clinical nutritionist at Tufts University

<sup>3</sup> Whole Dog Journal March 2000

dehydrated), for convenience. If you choose a fresh food diet, you must ensure you are creating a balanced diet. It's always best to consult your veterinarian. Additional useful sources include: DogsNaturallyMagazine.com (geared toward dogs but you can glean a lot of good information applicable to cats) and BalanceIt.com (for references on how to create a balanced diet when preparing home-cooked food).

If you must use kibble, the best thing to remember is to look for good sources of protein, whole foods, and natural preservation vs. additives. The more nutrient dense the food is (appropriate balance and quality of meat, with or without minimal vegetables, vs. grains); the more digestible it will be for your feline companion. The more digestible the food is, the more the body will utilize it and less waste is produced. Keep an eye on pet food recalls (dogfoodadvisor.com – should list cat foods as well); even manufacturers with good reputations can end up on the list. If you can afford it and can make the transition to fresh food for your cat (raw or lightly cooked) the difference in cost for high quality food is well worth it in the health of your kitty.

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