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# FEEDING YOUR CAT: KNOW THE BASICS OF FELINE NUTRITION

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[www.catinfo.org](http://www.catinfo.org)

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Diet is the brick and mortar of health. This paper lays out some often-ignored principles of feline nutrition and explains why cats have a better chance at optimal health if they are fed a *quality canned food diet instead of dry kibble*. Putting a little thought into what you feed your cat(s) can pay big dividends over their lifetime and very possibly help them avoid serious, painful and costly illnesses. An increasing number of American Veterinary Medical Association members, including board-certified veterinary internists, are now strongly recommending the feeding of canned food instead of dry kibble.

The three key *negative* issues associated with dry food are:

- 1) type of protein - too high in plant-based versus animal-based proteins
  - 2) carbohydrate load is too high
  - 3) water content is too low
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## Topics

- But my cat is "fine" on dry food!
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## My Cat is Doing Just "Fine" on Dry Food!

Every living creature is “fine” until outward signs of a disease process are exhibited. That may sound like a very obvious and basic statement but if you think about it.....

Every cat on the Feline Diabetes Message Board was “fine” until their owners started to recognize the signs of diabetes.

Every cat with a blocked urinary tract was “fine” until they start straining to urinate and either died from a ruptured bladder or had to be rushed to the hospital for emergency catheterization.

Every cat with an inflamed bladder (cystitis) was “fine” until they ended up in pain, passing blood in their urine, and missing their litter box.

Every cancer patient was “fine” until their tumor grew large enough or spread far enough so that clinical signs were observed by the patient.

Every cat was ‘fine’ until the feeding of species-inappropriate, hyperallergenic ingredients caught up with him and he started to show signs of IBD (inflammatory bowel disease).

Every cat was "fine" until that kidney or bladder stone got big enough to cause clinical signs.

**The point is that diseases 'brew' long before being noticed by the living being.**

This is why the statement “but my cat is healthy/fine on dry food” means very little to me because I believe in **preventative nutrition** - not locking the barn door after the horse is gone. I don't want to end up saying “oops.....I guess he is not so fine now!!” when a patient presents to me with a medical problem that could have been avoided if he would have been feed a species-appropriate diet to begin with.

Of course, in order to be on board with the 'preventative nutrition' argument, a person has to understand the fact that carbohydrates wreak havoc on a cat's blood sugar balance, that a urinary tract system is much healthier with an appropriate amount of water flowing through it, that cats inherently have a low thirst drive and need water \*with\* their food, and finally, that cats are designed to get their protein from meat – not plants.

## Cats Need *Animal*-Based Protein

Cats are obligate (strict) carnivores and are very different from dogs in their nutritional needs. What does it mean to be an ‘obligate carnivore’? It means that your cat was built by Mother Nature to get her nutritional needs met by the consumption of a large amount of **animal-based proteins** (meat) and derives much less nutritional support from **plant-based proteins** (grains). It means that cats lack specific metabolic (enzymatic) pathways and cannot utilize plant proteins as efficiently as animal proteins.

It is very important to remember that not all proteins are created equal.

Proteins derived from animal tissues have a complete amino acid profile. (Amino acids are the building blocks of proteins. Think of them as pieces of a puzzle.) Plant-based proteins do not contain the full compliment (puzzle pieces) of the critical amino acids required by an obligate carnivore. The quality and composition of a protein (how many puzzle pieces it has) is also referred to as its **biological value**.

Humans and dogs can take the pieces of the puzzle in the plant protein and, from those, make the missing pieces. Cats cannot do this. This is why humans and dogs can live on a vegetarian diet but cats cannot. (Note that I do *not* recommend vegetarian diets for dogs.)

**Taurine** is one of the most important amino acids that is present in meat but is missing from plants. Taurine deficiency will cause blindness and heart problems in cats.

**The protein in dry food, which is often heavily plant-based, is not equal in *quality* to the protein in canned food, which is meat-based.** The protein in dry food, therefore, earns a lower biological value score.

Because plant proteins are cheaper than meat proteins, pet food companies will have a higher profit margin when using corn, wheat, soy, rice, etc.

Veterinary nutritionists and pet food company representatives will argue that they are smart enough to know *\*exactly\** what is missing from a plant in terms of nutrient *forms* and *amounts* - nutrients that would otherwise be in a meat-based diet. They will then claim that these missing elements are added to their diets to make it complete and balanced to sustain life in an obligate carnivore.

The problem with this way of thinking is that Man is just not that smart and has made fatal errors in the past when trying to guess how to compensate for such a **drastic deviation from nature**. Not all that long ago (1980s) cats were going blind and dying from heart problems due to Man's arrogance. It was discovered in the late 1980s that cats are exquisitely sensitive to taurine deficiency and our cats were paying dearly for Man straying so far from nature in order to increase the profit margin of the pet food manufacturers.

There are several situations that can lead to a diet being deficient in taurine but one of them is using a diet that relies heavily on plants as its source of protein. Instead of lowering their profit margin and going back to nature by adding more meat to the diets, the pet food companies simply started supplementing their diets with taurine.

This is all well and good - for this particular problem - but how do we know that Man is not blindly going along unaware of another critical nutrient that is missing from a plant-based diet? **Why is Man so arrogant that he thinks he can stray so far from what a cat is designed by nature to eat?**

Let's also ask ourselves the following question: How many cats become ill or die from these species-inappropriate diets yet the patient's diet is never even questioned as a possible cause of the illness or death? We cannot answer that question definitively but I have no doubt that the answer would be "many".

Do cats survive on these supplemented plant-based diets? Yes, many of them do.

Do cats thrive on these diets? No, they do not.

Please pay special attention to the words **\*survive\*** versus **\*thrive\*** as there is a very big difference between the two states of health.

Another important issue with regard to the protein contained in a dry food is that it has been cooked at very high temperatures for a long period of time. This extensive cooking required to dry the product significantly decreases the biological value of the protein sources.

Harsh cooking also destroys other nutrients. Man then has to guess which nutrients – in what form and amounts – were destroyed by this cooking process and then try to add them back into the diet.

With regard to the overall protein amounts contained in a food, do not be confused by the listing of the protein percentages in dry food compared to canned food. At first glance, it might appear that the dry food has a higher amount of protein than the canned food—but this is *not* true on a dry matter basis which is the accurate way to compare the two foods. Calculating the nutrient values on a dry matter basis removes the water from the equation allowing us to then compare canned food to dry food. Most canned foods, when figured on a dry matter basis, have more protein than dry food. And remember, even if this were not the case, the percentage numbers do not tell the whole story. *It is the protein's biological value that is critical.*

### **We Are Feeding Cats Too Many Carbohydrates**

In their natural setting, cats—whose unique biology makes them true carnivores--would not consume the high level of carbohydrates (grains) that are in the dry foods that we routinely feed them. You would never see a wild cat chasing down a herd of biscuits running across the plains of Africa or dehydrating her mouse and topping it off with corn meal gluten soufflé.

In the wild, your cat would be eating a high protein, high-moisture content, meat-based diet, with a moderate level of fat and with **only approximately 3-5 percent of her diet consisting of carbohydrates**. The average dry food contains 35-50 percent carbohydrates. Some of the cheaper dry foods contain even higher levels.

This is NOT the diet that Mother Nature intended for your cat to eat.

A high quality canned food, on the other hand, contains approximately 3-5 percent carbohydrates.

Please note that not all canned foods are suitably low in carbohydrates. For instance, most of the Hill's Science Diet non-prescription (over-the-counter) and prescription diets are very high in carbohydrates and are not foods that I would choose to feed.

Cats have a physiological decrease in the ability to utilize carbohydrates due to the lack of specific enzymatic pathways that are present in other mammals, and the lack a salivary enzyme called amylase. **Cats have no dietary need for carbohydrates and, more worrisome is the fact that too many carbohydrates can be highly detrimental to their health, as I explain below.**

With this in mind, it would be as illogical to feed a carnivore a steady diet of meat-flavored cereals as it would be to feed meat to a vegetarian like a horse or a cow, right? So why are we continuing to feed our carnivores like herbivores? Why are we feeding such a species-inappropriate diet? The answers are simple. Grains are cheap. Dry food is convenient. Affordability and convenience sells.

However, is a carbohydrate-laden, plant-based, water-depleted dry food the best diet for our cats? Absolutely not.

Obligate carnivores are designed to eat meat – **not** grains - and they need to consume water *with* their food as explained below.

### **Cats Need Plenty of Water *With* Their Food**

Another extremely important nutrient with respect to overall health is water. It is very important for a cat to ingest water *with* its food, as **the cat does not have a very strong thirst drive**. This is a critical point. This lack of a strong thirst drive leads to **low-level, chronic dehydration when dry food makes up the bulk of their diet**.

Cats are designed to obtain most of their water *with* their diet since their normal prey contains approximately 70 - 75 percent water. Dry foods only contain 7-10 percent water whereas canned foods contain approximately 78 percent water. Canned foods therefore more closely approximate the natural diet of the cat and are better suited to meet the cat's water needs.

A cat consuming a predominantly dry-food diet does drink more water than a cat consuming a canned food diet, but in the end, when water from all sources is added together (what's in their diet plus what they drink), the cat on dry food consumes approximately *half* the amount of water compared with a cat eating canned foods. This is a crucial point when one considers how common kidney and bladder problems are in the cat.

Side note: Please keep in mind that when your cat starts eating a more appropriately hydrated diet of canned food, his urine output will increase significantly. **Therefore, litter boxes need to be scooped more frequently or more boxes need to be added to the home.** Please see *The Litter Box From Your Cat's Point of View* at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org) for reasons why I strongly feel that clumping litter is the only sanitary choice of litter to use for cats. Non-clumping litters (non-clumping clay, pellets, or crystals) do not allow you to remove all of the urine and are not sanitary litters.

## [Learn How To Read a Pet Food Ingredient Label](#)

- This is where it gets tough. The current labeling system for pet foods is seriously lacking in usable information. The "guaranteed analysis" numbers that you find on a can of food simply gives a wide range of the levels of water, protein, fat, etc. that are contained in the food. You can get a *rough* idea of what is in the food but, ideally, it should be mandatory to put the more accurate 'as fed' values on the can. However, I do not see this happening anytime soon. This would be more along the lines of the information that we find on our own packaged foods.
- Looking at the list of ingredients also gives an incomplete picture of what is actually in the food in terms of *amount* of each ingredient. Without knowing the actual amount of each ingredient, we have no idea of the impact of the ingredient on the nutritional profile of the food. For instance, when we see a high carbohydrate ingredient like rice on the label, we know that this food item has no business being in cat food but how do we really know the *quantity* of rice that is in the food? Is it present in a small amount or a large amount? **This is why it is important to not just consider the list of ingredients but to also look at the protein/fat/carbohydrate profile of the food** which can be found at [www.geocities.com/jmpeerson/canfood.html](http://www.geocities.com/jmpeerson/canfood.html) for many commercial foods. This chart is often referred to as "Janet and Binky's chart".

A good example of the above issue is a food like canned Wellness. At first glance, this food may be dismissed as inappropriate for a carnivore because it contains several high carbohydrate ingredients in the form of fruits and vegetables. However, in reality, the low carbohydrate level (3-5%) tells us that the amount of fruits and vegetables is very low.

If a food that you are feeding is not included on the above list, you can contact the company and ask for the breakdown of their foods in terms of the calories that come from protein, the calories that come from fat, and the calories that come from carbohydrates. **Optimally, your cat's diet should not derive more than 10 per cent of its calories from carbohydrates.**

- The words "natural" or "premium" or "veterinarian recommended" are not necessarily indicative of high quality. Also, if you are thinking about feeding any 'breed-specific' food, please don't fall for the utterly absurd claims that these companies make regarding these diets. A Siamese is no different from a Persian or a Maine Coon – or an 'alley cat' - when considering optimal dietary composition.
- Contrary to what is often believed, many, if not all, of the so-called **prescription diets** sold in veterinary hospitals are *not* formulated for optimal health of a carnivore. Many of these products contain corn, wheat, and soy which have no logical place in your cat's diet and these diets are often very high in carbohydrates. Many of them also contain by-products as the main - and often only - source of protein. Please note that not all by-products are inferior in quality. Please see my Commercial Canned Food page at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org) for more information on by-products.

It is also important to note that Hill's – the maker of Science Diet – continues to use extremely questionable preservatives such as BHA, BHT and ethoxyquin in many of their products. Other companies have abandoned the practice of using these chemicals as preservatives – opting for more natural and safer methods. Unfortunately, many veterinarians are very poorly educated in the area of nutrition. Too often their recommendations are taken from the pet food industry which does not always have your cat's best interest in mind when formulating their products. In most instances, you will be paying far more money than you should be for the low quality ingredients that many of these prescription products contain.

- Look for a muscle meat (preferably, not an organ meat like liver) as the first ingredient. A muscle meat will be listed as "chicken," or "turkey," etc., not "chicken by-products" or "chicken by-product meal," or "chicken broth" or "liver". "Chicken meal" is technically a muscle meat but the term "meal" denotes that it has been rendered (cooked for a long time at very high temperatures) and is lower quality than meat that has not been as heavily processed. A "meal" product is more commonly found in dry foods. By-products can include feet, intestines, feathers, egg shells, etc. and can be less nutritious than meat. By-products can

also be very nutritious organ meat but the problem is that we never really know what the term “by-products” includes. Again, see the Commercial Canned Food page at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org) for more information.

- Grains should be absent but, unfortunately, grains are cheap so they are included in many commercial cat foods. Think 'profit margin'. Grain is cheaper than meat. If grains are present, they should be minimal in amount. This is where checking out the carbohydrate content comes into play. It is ideal to feed a grain-free diet. Corn, wheat and soy are thought to be common allergens (as is yeast) and the carbohydrate fraction of these grains will also cause a rapid rise in blood sugar in many cats. Soy contains phytoestrogens and also negatively influences the thyroid gland. Given how common hyperthyroidism is in the cat, soy has no business being in cat food. Unfortunately, soy is a common ingredient used by pet food manufacturers.

More information regarding pet food label interpretation and various food choices can be found on my Commercial Canned Food page at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org).

## **Common Feline Health Problems and Their Ties to Diet**

There is a very strong and extremely logical connection between the way that we are currently feeding our obligate carnivores and many of the life-threatening diseases that afflict them.

- **Diabetes:** Diabetes is a very serious – and difficult to manage – disease that is very common in cats. Why is it so common? The species-inappropriate high level of carbohydrates in dry food (and some canned foods) wreaks havoc on the blood sugar level of an obligate carnivore. The blood sugar level rises significantly upon ingestion of carbohydrates. With chronic hyperglycemia (high blood sugar) the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas down-regulate, or “burn out,” leading to diabetes.

Many cats have been successfully weaned off of insulin - or had the dosage significantly lowered - when transitioned to a low carbohydrate canned food.

In addition to the issue of carbohydrates, dry food - because it is very calorie dense and is often free-fed - is the main reason why a very high percentage of cats are overweight or obese.

Fat cells produce a substance that makes the other cells in the body resistant to insulin. This promotes the diabetic state.

**It is very important to understand the impact that a low-carb diet has on the insulin needs of a diabetic cat.**

**If you have a diabetic cat that is on insulin and you are considering switching him to a more appropriate low-carb diet, please see my Feline Diabetes page at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org) first.**

**Please also be aware that many veterinarians underestimate the favorable impact that a low carbohydrate diet has on the insulin needs of the patient and they do not lower the insulin dose enough. If the insulin is not lowered accordingly, an overdose of insulin will occur which can be life-threatening. I strongly suggest that all caretakers of diabetic cats home-test to monitor blood glucose levels using a standard glucometer as a matter of routine, but careful monitoring is especially important when implementing a diet change.**

See the Home Testing section on the *Feline Diabetes* page at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org).

Many veterinarians prescribe expensive diets such as Purina DM (Diabetes Management) and Science Diet m/d but you can do much better for your cat (and your pocketbook) by feeding other more nutritious - and lower carbohydrate - canned foods such as Wellness, Nature's Variety, Merrick, Avoderm, EVO, etc.

See the *Commercial Canned Foods* webpage, as well as the *Proteins/Fats/Carbs chart* at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org). You should be feeding a diet that derives fewer than 10% of its calories from carbohydrates.

- **Kidney Disease** (CKD – formerly called “CRF”): Chronic kidney disease is probably the leading cause of mortality in the cat. It is troubling to think about the role that chronic dehydration may play in feline kidney failure. And remember, cats *are* chronically dehydrated when they are on a diet of predominantly dry food. The prescription dry 'renal diets' such as Science Diet k/d - which is commonly prescribed by veterinarians - contain only a small amount of moisture leaving your cat in a less than optimal state of water balance.

I must say that I find it truly amazing when I hear about the very large numbers of cats receiving subcutaneous fluids while being maintained on a diet of dry food. This is extremely illogical and unhealthy and every attempt should be made to get these cats on a diet that contains a higher moisture content. Please also note the following list of the first four ingredients of Science Diet dry k/d after reviewing the section above on reading a pet food label - and bearing in mind that your cat is a carnivore. **This is a diet that would never find its way into a food bowl owned by any cat in my care.** The first three ingredients are not even meat and the fourth ingredient is a by-product meal.

Science Diet dry k/d:

Brewers rice, corn gluten meal, pork fat (preserved with mixed tocopherols and citric acid), chicken by-product meal

The purpose of this prescription diet is to restrict protein which, *unfortunately*, it certainly does. **However, please understand that there are no studies showing that restricting protein to this level will prevent further deterioration of kidney function.** k/d restricts protein to the point that the cat will often catabolize (use for fuel) his own muscle mass which results in muscle wasting and weight loss. The level of protein in this diet is not only at an **extremely low level**, it is in an **incomplete form for a carnivore**. Note that it is made up mainly of plant proteins - not meat proteins.

- **Cystitis (bladder inflammation) and Bladder/Kidney Stones**: Cystitis and stones are extremely common in the cat and can be very painful and life-threatening. Cystitis can lead to inappropriate urination (urinating outside of the litter box) and stones can cause a fatal rupture of the bladder by blocking the outflow of urine.

**Any cat that is repeatedly entering the litter box but not voiding any urine is in need of IMMEDIATE medical attention!** This is one reason why it is so important to use a clumping litter. Clumping litter allows you to see just how much, if any, urine is being voided.

It is important to note, however, that "crystals" are not the same thing as stones. **Crystals are often a normal finding in a cat's urine and it is not appropriate to put the cat on a "special urinary tract" formula – or antibiotics - when these are found in the urine.**

**Important:** I often see too much clinical significance placed on the identification of crystals in the urine without regard to how the urine sample was handled. It is very important to understand that crystals **will often form once outside of the body within a very short (one hour) period of time.** If the veterinarian does not examine the urine right away and either sends it to an outside laboratory or uses a free-catch sample that the owner brought from home, an erroneous diagnosis of crystals may be made. This is called a "false positive" report and results in unnecessary worry on the part of the owner and often leads to the cat being placed on an inappropriate, low quality diet.

With regard to overall kidney and bladder health, I cannot stress strongly enough how important **WATER, WATER, WATER** is in both the prevention and treatment of diseases involving this organ system.

When a cat is on a diet of water-depleted dry food, they produce a more highly **concentrated** urine (higher urine specific gravity - USG) and they produce a lower **volume** of urine which means that a **higher concentration of crystals** will be present in the urine. This increases the chance of these crystals forming life-threatening stones. The concentrated urine and the lack of volume production can also be very irritating to the lining of the bladder wall predisposing them to painful cystitis.

Please keep in mind that **a cat has a very low thirst drive and is designed to get water *with* their food.** A diet of canned food will keep a proper amount of water flowing through the urinary tract system and help maintain its health.

If leaves keep falling on your driveway and you don't regularly hose down or sweep your driveway, those leaves will build up and cause a problem. If you picture crystals as the leaves in this analogy, it is easy to see how canned food does a better job of 'hosing down' your cat's bladder than dry food does.

Urine pH is also often considered when discussing urinary tract problems but we really need to stop focusing on pH. Again, a proper amount of water in the diet is the important issue here - not urine pH. Many of the so-called feline lower urinary tract diets are formulated to make the urine acidic but it is thought that these low magnesium, acidifying diets may actually exacerbate painful cystitis. Also, these acidifying diets, which are so often prescribed, may end up promoting calcium oxalate stones and hypokalemia (low potassium in the blood).

It is also important to note - for those people still stuck on worrying about the urine pH - that there are many factors which determine the pH of urine and only one of them is diet.

With regard to dry food and urinary tract health, aside from the lack of water in this type of diet, there is also a correlation between the consumption of a high carbohydrate diet and the formation of struvite crystals.

Veterinarians often prescribe Science Diet dry c/d and x/d for urinary tract problems but again, these diets are only ten percent water and contain a high level of species-inappropriate ingredients and questionable preservatives. They are also very high in carbohydrates with dry c/d containing 42 percent of its weight as carbohydrates. Please note the first few ingredients in c/d while remembering that your cat is a carnivore:

Brewers rice, chicken by-product meal, corn gluten meal, pork fat (preserved with mixed tocopherols and citric acid), chicken liver flavor, taurine, preserved with BHT and BHA

Diet is not the only issue involved with cystitis but it is an important one and one that we can control. **Stress** is also thought to play a very significant role in cystitis and even cats that are fed a 100 percent canned food diet may experience bouts of cystitis. This is a very frustrating disease to deal with and one that the veterinary community does not have all the answers for. What we do know is that **decreasing stress** and **increasing the water content of the diet** are the most important management issues to address. The water content of the diet is easy to control. The stress issue is another matter and is not always easy to address since cats can be very sensitive and are often 'silent' in their stress.

**Cystitis can be extremely painful and it is very important to address pain management in these cats.**

Remember: pain = stress and we are trying to minimize the stress in these patients. Buprinex is a good choice for a pain medication. This is superior to Torbugesic which has been used for pain management in the cat in the past. (Buprinex is a prescription medication that you must get from your veterinarian.) Unfortunately, many veterinarians overlook pain medications as a very important part of the treatment of this common feline problem.

A note on **antibiotic** usage in these cases: Most cases of cystitis are sterile. **In other words, they are *not* the result of an infection and should *not* be placed on antibiotics.**

Only ~1% of cats with cystitis that are under 10 years of age have a urinary tract infection, yet many veterinarians place these patients on antibiotics when these drugs are not warranted. Most cats under 10 years of age produce a very concentrated urine (USG greater than 1.030) and bacteria do not grow well in concentrated urine.

In cats over 10 years of age, infections are more common but that still does not mean that older cats with cystitis should automatically be put on antibiotics. The reason that an older cat is more prone to urinary tract infections is because kidney disease is more common in this age group and so these cats will have a more dilute urine which is not as hostile to bacterial growth.

Diabetes and hyperthyroidism are also more common in cats over 10 years of age and both diseases cause the patient to be more prone to urinary tract infections.

A urine **culture and sensitivity (C & S)** should be run to check for an infection if the patient has a low urine specific gravity or is diabetic. It must be kept in mind that even with a low USG, most cases of cystitis are not due to an infection. This is why it is important to run a C & S before placing the patient on antibiotics. Antibiotics should only be used when the presence of an infection can be established.

A C & S test identifies the bacteria (if present) and tells the veterinarian which antibiotic is appropriate. The urine for a C & S needs to be obtained by way of cystocentesis which involves using a syringe and needle to obtain urine directly from the bladder. This is not a painful procedure for the cat and this method is the only way to obtain a sample for accurate information in order to properly treat with antibiotics. One problem, however, is that a sample may be difficult to obtain without waiting a few hours since cats with cystitis urinate frequently and often do not have enough urine in their bladder to get a good sample.

To get around this problem, some veterinarians will give the patient a dose of subcutaneous (just under the skin) fluids. The cat is then put into a cage without a litter box. Within 2-3 hours, the bladder is usually full enough to obtain a urine sample via cystocentesis.

**We have to stop treating all cases of cystitis with antibiotics without supporting evidence of an infection!**

Cystitis will often recur in these patients and this painful health problem can be very frustrating to deal with. On a good note, most cats will have their clinical signs spontaneously resolve even without any treatment. In fact, it has often been said, somewhat jokingly, that a cat with cystitis will often stop exhibiting clinical signs within in seven days with treatment and in one week without treatment.

- **Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD)**: IBD can cause vomiting and diarrhea and/or constipation in the cat. IBD can also present with weight loss as the only clinical sign. There are many unanswered questions with respect to this disease process, but it seems logical to start to “treat” a gastrointestinal problem in the cat with a species-appropriate diet. Too often these cats are treated with a high level of steroids, along with other drugs, and a prescription grain-laden, dry food diet. I feel very strongly that this common therapeutic regimen needs to be abandoned. There are an impressive number of anecdotal reports of cats that were terribly ill with IBD exhibiting dramatic improvement when ALL dry food was removed from their diet. Taking it even one step further, **there are many reports of cats with IBD that improved tremendously on a *balanced, grainless, raw-meat diet without any vegetables added***. (See [www.catnutrition.org](http://www.catnutrition.org) for more information on IBD and diet. Also, see *Making Cat Food* at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org) for a balanced recipe.)
- **Obesity**: Obesity is an extremely common and very serious health problem in cats. For instance, overweight cats are four times more likely to develop diabetes than cats that are at an optimal weight. Obligate carnivores are designed to meet their energy needs with a high protein, moderate fat diet with little to no carbohydrates. Carbohydrates are minimally used for energy and those that are not used are converted to and stored as fat. The so-called “light” diets that are on the market have targeted the fat content as the nutrient to be decreased, but in doing so, the pet food manufacturers have increased the *grain* fraction, leading to a higher level of carbohydrates. Hence, many overweight cats eating these diets are still obese. **These "light" products are among the most species-inappropriate, unhealthy diets available to cat caretakers**. Many caretakers feed very small amounts of these diets hoping that their cat will lose weight but feeding a small amount of a diet that is inappropriate for the species is NOT the answer! The caretaker simply ends up with a crabby, overweight cat.

See Molly’s story at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org) *Feline Obesity* to read how this sweet cat went from an inactive obese cat that could barely walk and could not even clean herself, to a very active and happy cat simply by transitioning her to canned Wellness. Molly now runs through the house playing like a normal cat. She can finally clean herself, and no longer limps.

Molly’s veterinarian had prescribed Science Diet dry r/d for her and instructed her caretaker to feed Molly only very small portions – and to put a shock collar on her to keep her away from her housemates’ food.

This is *not* sound – or humane - obesity management advice. **Science Diet r/d is an illogical and poor quality diet** that contains 33 percent carbohydrates and the following - less than optimal - ingredients:

Chicken by-product meal, corn meal, powdered cellulose 18.5% (a source of fiber), corn gluten meal, chicken liver flavor, vegetable oil, taurine, L-carnitine, preserved with BHT, BHA and ethoxyquin

There are much healthier and more logical ways to address feline obesity.

- **Hepatic Lipidosis (Fatty Liver Disease):** This is the most common metabolic liver disease of cats. Overweight cats that go longer than 48 hours without eating, for any reason, are in danger of developing this serious, and often fatal, disease. Feeding a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet helps keep cats at an optimal, healthy body weight and, in turn, makes them less likely to end up with fatty liver disease.
- **Dental Disease:** Long-standing claims that cats have less dental disease when they are fed dry food versus canned food are grossly overrated, inaccurate, and are not supported by recent studies. This frequently stated (among veterinarians and lay people) myth continues to harm cats by perpetuating the idea that their food bowls need to be filled up with an unhealthy diet in order to keep their teeth clean. The idea that dry food promotes dental health makes about as much sense as the idea that crunchy cookies would promote dental health in a human.

First, dry food is hard, but brittle, and merely shatters with little to no abrasive effect on the teeth. Second, a cat's jaws and teeth are designed for shearing and tearing meat – not biting down on dry kibble. Third, many cats swallow the majority of their dry food whole.

There are many factors – known and unknown - that contribute to dental disease in the cat such as genetics, viruses, and diet. There remain many unanswered questions concerning the fact that cats often suffer from poor dental health. However, feeding a high carbohydrate, species-inappropriate dry kibble diet is a **negative factor**, not a positive one.

Dry kibble does not even come close to mimicking a cat's normal diet of mice, birds, rabbits, etc. Given what a cat does eat in nature, it makes much more sense to be feeding part of the diet in the form of large chunks of meat (as large as you can get your cat to chew on) or gizzards which a cat's teeth are designed to chew. Raw meat is 'tougher' to chew than cooked meat so I prefer to use raw meat to promote dental health. (See *Making Cat Food – Dental Health* at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org))

Notice the phrase “part of the diet” in the above sentence. It is very important to understand that **plain meat (ie - without bones or another source of calcium) is very unbalanced** since there is minimal calcium in meat. Remember that when a cat eats his normal prey, he is consuming the bones along with the meat.

When fed as a supplement to most commercial canned foods, it is safe to feed ~15% of the daily calories in the form of plain meat. For example, if a cat is eating 6 ounces of canned food per day, you could feed him 5 ounces of canned food plus 1 ounce of chunked muscle meat per day.

When people ask me “how often should my cats be fed chunks of meat?”, I reply “how often do you brush your own teeth?”

Please understand that I am not saying that canned food is necessarily better for teeth than dry food. For optimal dental health, a cat should not be eating either canned or dry food since neither food type promotes healthy teeth but we have to work with what is practical in a typical home setting and feeding a cat a 'whole carcass prey' diet is not terribly practical - even if it would be great for their teeth. The compromise is to at least give them some muscle meat to chew on and stop fooling ourselves into thinking that dry food promotes dental health in our cats.

- **Feline Asthma/Allergic Airway Disease:** Many cats have had their respiratory symptoms (coughing/difficulty breathing) subside considerably, or disappear completely, once they are placed on a canned food diet, or a meat-based home-prepared diet. Some of these struggling cats may have been

reacting to storage mites or cockroach antigens that are present in dry foods, or they may have been reacting to the gluten (protein fraction) part of the grains that are present in dry foods.

Sadly, many cats exhibiting debilitating lung disease are simply put on an immunosuppressive dose of steroids - while still being fed an inappropriate diet. While steroids are necessary in some cases of airway disease, they are not addressing the root of the problem which can, in many cases, be an allergy to proteins in the form of species-inappropriate grains, and insect antigens. Steroids commonly cause diabetes in cats and also render them vulnerable to infections from viruses, bacteria, and fungal agents so it is very important to make sure you have ruled out diet as a cause of the cat's respiratory symptoms.

## [The Safety of Dry Food](#)

Many people cringe at the idea of feeding a raw meat diet due to concerns of bacterial contamination. However, dry food is very far from a clean, safe, and pathogen-free source of food for your cat. Please see the *Making Cat Food* page at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org) which details just a few of the many pet foods (mainly dry foods) that have been recently recalled due to contamination with deadly chemicals, bacteria (salmonella, etc.), fungal mycotoxins, and storage mites.

The issue of rancid fats in dry food is also discussed on the *Making Cat Food* page.

There is no doubt in my mind that the recalls are just the 'tip of the iceberg' and that many illnesses and deaths of cats and dogs have resulted from consuming commercial pet foods yet these foods were never recognized as the cause of the pet's illness. These illnesses/deaths include the various health problems (diabetes, etc.) that manifest themselves due to the **species-inappropriate composition** (composition = percentage of calories coming from proteins/fats/carbohydrates) of the diet, as well as out-and-out **contamination** issues as discussed in the Pet Food Recall section on the *Making Cat Food* page.

**Unfortunately, in many cases, humans just don't recognize these illogical and unsafe diets as the cause of the pet's illness.** Humans - including veterinarians - often fail to put 2 + 2 together in many instances of a pet's ill health or death. Food is usually the last thing to even be considered as a cause or contributing factor in the event of an illness or death.

## [Transitioning Dry Food Addicts to Canned Food](#)

This is the hard part. Cats, like children, often resist what is best for them. The two most frequent comments that I hear from people when trying to convince them to feed their cats a healthier diet are "my cat won't eat canned food" and "but my cat really *likes* his dry food." Children really like potato chips and ice cream but that certainly does not mean those food items constitute optimal nutrition.

**The transition process often involves much more than just plunking down a new food item. Time, patience and tricks are often required.**

One reason that cats like dry food so much is because the pet food companies do not play fair when manufacturing this sub-optimal food source. They coat the kibble with extremely enticing animal digest sprays which are very pleasing to a cat - making a poor quality diet very desirable to the target animal.

In addition to the aforementioned coating of dry food with animal digests, another issue is one of a crunchy *texture* which is very different from canned food. Cats are very resistant to such a drastic change in the texture of their food.

If you are convinced that getting your cat off of dry food is the way to go, read on for some tips on how to accomplish this.

The key is to do it **slowly and with patience** and incorporate various tricks for the stubborn cats. **The most important issue is actually *making the change*, not how fast you accomplish it.** I must say that my cats tested every ounce of patience I had over a 3 + month period of time during their transition from dry to canned food. They had been on dry food their entire lives and did not recognize canned food as food.

The single biggest mistake I see people make time and again is to say that their cat "won't touch" the new food and then panic and fill up the bowl with dry food. In many cases, it is simply not that easy to get cats off of dry food. (See Molly's story at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org) *Feline Obesity* for a look at one *very* stubborn cat.)

There are two categories of cats - those who will eat canned food and those who will be *extremely* resistant to eating anything other than dry food. If your cat falls into the first category, lucky you. These cats will take to it with the attitude of "finally – an appropriate diet for my species." In this case, if your cat has been on all dry food, or only receives canned food as a 'treat' on occasion, start by feeding canned food in increasing amounts. Gradually decrease the dry, taking about a week to fully switch the cat over to 100 percent canned food.

Some cats may experience **softer stools** during the transition. I do not worry if this happens and tend to 'ride it out'. If diarrhea results from the diet change you will either need to experiment with different canned foods or slow the transition down and do it over a period of several weeks.

The average cat should eat **4-6 ounces of canned food per day** split between 2-3 meals but this is just a general guideline. When determining how much you should be feeding your cat once transitioned to canned food, keep it simple. **Too fat? Feed less. Too thin? Feed more.**

Now....for the stubborn cats.....

If you are unlucky like I was, and your cat does not recognize the fact that he is a carnivore and would live a healthier life if eating canned food, (or a home-prepared raw meat diet) then you will have some work to do. Some cats that have been on dry food for their entire life will be quite resistant to the diet change and may take several weeks or longer to make the transition to a healthier diet.

For 'resistant-to-change' cats, you will need to use the **normal sensation of hunger** to help with the transition. For this reason, it is very important to **stop free-feeding dry food**. This is the first, and very critical, step. You need to establish set mealtimes. They are not going to try anything new if their bowl of junk food is in front of them 24/7.

Cats do not need food available at all times. It really is okay for them to experience a hunger pain! That said, it was *very* hard for me to listen to my cats begging for food even though I was strong in my conviction that I was heading them in the best direction for optimal health. It truly was a stressful time for me and them - actually, I think it was harder on me! This is where many people fail and just give in and fill up the dry food bowl. There were a few times when I had to call my 'sponsor' and was instructed to "just leave the house if you can't take looking into those eyes!" I left the house. Those pitiful little cries of "I have not had food for two WHOLE hours!" were hard to take. But, lo and behold, they were just fine when I returned. Not one cat had died from hunger.

On the other hand, **do not attempt to withhold food for long periods of time** (greater than 24 hours) with the hope that your cat will choose the new food. I prefer to try to 'convince' them that a high quality canned food really is good for them, rather than to try starving them into it - which does not work anyway. Allowing a cat to go without food - especially an overweight cat - for a long period of time (greater than 48 hours) can be quite dangerous and may result in **hepatic lipidosis** (fatty liver disease).

**Hepatic lipidosis can also develop when a cat consumes 50% or less of his daily caloric requirements over a period of many days.** The definition of "many" varies from cat-to-cat. For this reason it is important to understand that you need to have some idea of the calories from canned food combined with the calories from dry food that your cat is consuming on a daily basis while you are implementing the transition to canned food. I have never seen a cat develop hepatic lipidosis when consuming at least 15 calories per pound per day. This number is figured on **lean body weight**, not fat weight.

See [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org) for a chart entitled *Protein/Fat/Carbohydrates* to find out the calories in various commercial foods.

**Example 1:** If your cat weighs 18 pounds but really should weigh 12 pounds, please make sure that he is consuming **at least** ~180 calories per day. (12 pounds lean body mass X 15 calories/pound/day = ~180 calories/day)

**Example 2:** If your cat is a proper weight at 12 pounds, a simple formula for the minimum caloric needs to maintain the weight of *most* cats is (13.6 X weight of cat in pounds) + 70. Younger/more active cats may need more calories.

So if your cat weighs 12 pounds and does not need to lose weight, please make sure that he is consuming ~233 calories/day. (13.6 X 12) + 70 = 233.

Canned foods never list the calorie content on the can but many dry foods do list this information on the bag. A *rough* guideline for the calorie content of most canned foods that are 78% moisture is ~30 calories/ounce but can range from 20 to 40 calories/ounce as shown by the Protein/Fats/Carbs chart at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org).

Most cats will lose some weight during the transition to canned food. Given that a very high percentage of cats are overweight to begin with, this is a favorable result of the diet change - **as long as they do not lose too much weight too fast!** A cat should never lose more than 1-2% of his body weight per week - preferably closer to 1%.

I highly suggest that all cat caregivers purchase a scale and weigh their cats periodically. This will help ensure a safe transition to a healthier diet and, in general, weight loss is often the first sign of ill health for any reason. I make it a point to weigh my cats at least twice yearly.

The Health -O-Meter HDC100-01 scale is one option. It weighs to the nearest 1/2 ounce and has a 'hold' button on it that helps obtain an accurate weight even for a cat that is moving around a bit.

All of my cats lost weight during the three months that it took to switch them to canned but none of them became too thin. They slimmed down to a nice lean body weight - and became much more active.

If your cat is overweight, please see *Feline Obesity* at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org).

Resign yourself to the fact that you *will* be very frustrated at times and you *will* be wasting canned food as they turn up their nose at it. Also, you may want to immediately switch your cat to a dry food that has fewer calories from carbohydrates than most dry foods. There are three grain-free/low carbohydrate dry foods currently on the market. Natura/Innova's EVO, Wellness CORE, and Nature's Variety Instinct.

The low-carb dry foods are very high in fat and therefore are very calorie dense. These foods must be **portion-controlled** otherwise, your cat may end up gaining weight. Note that dry Innova EVO has 612 calories per cup according to the information on the bag. One quarter of a cup contains 153 calories so be very careful to pay attention to how much of these high calorie dry foods you feed.

The average cat only needs about 200 - 250 calories/day.

The low-carb dry foods are also very high in phosphorus. This is especially detrimental for cats with compromised kidney function.

And, of course, these low-carb dry foods are water-depleted just like all dry foods are and are cooked at very high temperatures in order to dry them out.

I do not recommend these dry foods for long-term feeding for all of the reasons stated above. Please use them only as transition diets.

Be sure to stay away from any "light" varieties since those types of foods are very high in carbohydrates.

Here are some various tricks for the stubborn ones.

Keep in mind that different tricks work on different cats:

- If your cat has been eating dry food on a free-choice basis, **take up the food and establish a schedule of two - three times per day feedings**. I really do prefer just twice-daily feedings when trying to transition them. A normal, healthy hunger response after 12 hours goes a long way to convince them to try something new. If you want to take the transition very slowly, you can feed the amount that your cat normally consumes in a 24 hour period - split up into two feedings. Many people, however, are unsure as to how much their free-fed cat really eats so I would start off by figuring out the calories that your cat needs to maintain his weight if he does not need to lose any weight.

Again, most cats only need 200-250 calories/day. Most dry foods list the calories/cup on the bag.

Leave the food down for 20 minutes, then remove any uneaten portion. Repeat in 8-12 hours depending on if you are feeding 2 or 3 times/day. During the first few days of transitioning to a set schedule, you can offer canned food during the dry food meals, or in-between meals. The stubborn ones, however, will not touch it. Do not despair - all cats will eventually eat canned food if their caregiver is determined, methodical and patient enough. Once your cat is on a schedule you will notice that he is more enthusiastic about food during his **proper mealtimes** and will be much more inclined to try something new.

- Once you have established scheduled mealtimes, you will most likely need to start feeding a bit less at each mealtime in order to get the normal sensation of hunger to work in your favor. **Again, we are trying to use the normal sensation of hunger to help us out. We are *not* trying to starve the cat into the diet change.**
- Once your cat is on a schedule of meal-feeding instead of free-feeding, try feeding a meal of canned food only. If he will not eat it - and the very stubborn ones won't - try not to get frustrated - and do NOT put down dry food. Try some of the other tips listed below. If he still will not eat the canned food, let him get a bit hungrier. Offer the canned again in a couple of hours. Try a different brand/flavor or a different 'trick'. Once it has been ~18 hours since he has eaten anything, give him just a small amount (1/4 of a cup - or less if it is EVO) of his dry food.
- Remember to be patient.
- Exercising your cat with a tassel toy before feeding can also really help stimulate his appetite.
- Cats' noses are much more sensitive than ours are. They can smell the dry food in the cupboards. I suggest either putting it in the refrigerator or putting it in a tightly sealed container. If they can smell it, they will hold out for it. Some people recommend getting it out of your house completely, but this is not possible when you are dealing with a very stubborn cat that needs a bit of time and patience to make the transition happen.
- **The following worked for my cats:** Sprinkle a very small amount of **tuna** – or any other favorite treat (some cats do not like fish and would prefer cooked chicken) - on the top of the canned food and then once they are eating this, start pressing it into the top of the new food. (The "light" tuna is better than the fancy white tuna because it has a stronger smell. Or, Trader Joe's makes a Cat Tuna that is very stinky.) Be careful to decrease the amount of fish as soon as possible. Health problems can occur with a predominantly fish-based diet. Plus, you do not want to create a situation where your cat will only eat very fishy foods.
- Make sure that any refrigerated canned food is **warmed up** a bit. Cats prefer their food at 'mouse body temperature'.
- Try offering some **cooked (or raw) chicken or meat baby food**. One of the goals is to get your cat used to eating food that does not crunch. He needs to get used to a different texture. Also, chicken is a great source of protein to point him in the proper direction toward a high protein, low carbohydrate diet. If he eats the chicken, he may head right into eating canned food. Then again....he may not.

- Try sprinkling some **parmesan cheese** on the canned food. Most cats love parmesan cheese and this trick has been very successful for me.
- Try a product called **FortiFlora**. Most cats LOVE FortiFlora and this has recently become **my favorite trick**. (You can get it online or from your vet.) This is a probiotic made by Purina but you are not going to actually use it for its probiotic properties. You are just going to use it as a flavor enhancer. **The base ingredient in FortiFlora is animal digest - the very substance that makes dry food so very enticing to cats**. The directions say to use 1 package/day – and you can use this much if you want to – but this amount is not usually necessary. Just sprinkle some on the food (maybe 1/5-1/10 of a package) just as you would use salt and pepper on your own food.
- There are numerous freeze dried meat treats on the market that you can also sprinkle on top of the canned food. Halo's Liv A Littles is a popular choice.
- Speaking of texture, a common question is "can I just soak the dry food in water?" I hedge more than just a bit at this question. Dry food has a high bacterial content. Mold is also often found in dry food. There have been many deaths of dogs and cats secondary to eating mold mycotoxins, vomitoxins and aflatoxins which often contaminate the grains found in dry food. If you want to try the trick of wetting down the dry food to alter the texture, please leave it out for only 20-30 minutes then discard it. Bacteria and mold thrive in moisture.
- Try dipping some dry food pieces in the juice from the canned food. Some cats may refuse to eat it if the dry food even touches the canned food. But if he will eat it with a bit of canned juice on it, try the **'chip and dip' trick**. Scoop up a tiny bit of canned food onto the piece of dry food. Put them on a separate plate from his *small* portion of dry food. Some cats will eat their small portion of dry and then go investigate the dry food with a tiny bit of canned on it.
- Going one step further, try adding a few small pieces of the canned food to the small portion of dry food. Your cat may pick around the canned food but will get used to the smell - and texture - even if he does not eat any pieces of the new food.
- Crush some dry food and sprinkle it on the top of the canned food.
- *If you do not think it will upset your cat*, try gently rubbing a bit of canned food or juice on the cat's gums. This may get him interested in the taste and texture of the new food - but do it *gently*. You do not want to make this a stressful situation and create a food aversion. (This trick is commonly used to get just-weaned kittens used to eating canned food.)
- *If you do not think it will upset your cat*, use your finger to put a tiny bit of canned food or juice on his paw for him to lick off. This has not worked for me in the two cats I have tried it on but it is another idea. Make sure you do it without stressing your cat. Again, you do not want to create a food aversion.
- If you have a multiple cat household, some cats like to eat alone in a less stressful environment, so you may need to take these cats into a separate, quiet room to think about the error of their ways - their carbohydrate/dry food addiction. Once in a quiet setting, away from the other cats, two of my cats would eat canned food/tuna 'meatballs' by hand. Not from a bowl, mind you, but only from my hand. I'm not sure who was being trained. They did eventually start eating from a bowl after a few hand feedings.
- Try various brands and flavors of canned foods - no matter how low in quality. You can worry about feeding a higher quality canned food later. The initial goal is just to get your cat used to eating canned food and not dry kibble.
- Syringe-feeding is also another option but has to be done with **finesse** and **patience** so as to avoid a food aversion. If you choose to syringe-feed, you do not necessarily need to feed him a full meal. Sometimes just syringing a 1-2 cc's can 'jump-start' your cat into eating the canned food - maybe not the first time but it will at least get him to taste the new food. The best way to syringe-feed is to kneel on the floor with your cat between your legs so he is facing the same way as you are. Then, using a small (1cc/TB) syringe, slip

it in the side of his mouth and give about 1/2 cc at a time. He may spit it out but you are just trying to get him used to the taste, not stress him.

No canned cat food will make it through the tip of a syringe but human meat baby food works well for this trick. You can also water it down a bit if you need to.

If you want to use canned cat food, you will need to cut the end off of the syringe so that the opening is as big as the barrel. Make sure that the tip is smooth. If you do not want to cut the tip of the syringe off, you will need to puree a pate (versus chunks) type of food. I use pureed Wellness for this. I run it through the blender with a small amount of water (~3-4 tablespoons/5.5 ounce can). Then I strain it to remove anything big enough to clog the small tip of the syringe. Syringe-feeding pureed Wellness is also much more nutritious for sick animals than Hill's a/d which is often prescribed by veterinarians. Wellness is also a balanced diet – unlike human baby food.

Even though human baby food is not a balanced diet for long-term use, it is a great tool that can be used to get your cat to transition to a more appropriate texture.

- I did have to take drastic measures for a foster cat named Molly. She was dangerously obese (double what she should have weighed) and would not eat canned food even after two weeks of syringe-feeding her. She needed to go in for a dental so while she was under general anesthesia, I put in a feeding tube that went directly to her stomach. This took the stress off of both of us. After two weeks of feeding her via the tube she started licking the canned food from my fingers then suddenly decided it was time to eat it. That was a several years ago and she is now a playful, animated cat. Before the weight loss, she could barely walk, could not clean herself, and was quite possibly headed for diabetes.
- **Don't give up.** One of my barn cats ate dry food for the first 12 years of her life. She would never touch the canned food that the other cats ate. Then, one day, she found her 'inner carnivore' and started eating canned food out of the blue! I was shocked. That was 4 years ago and she has been on a 100% canned food diet since she made the switch.

These are just a few tricks that you can try. Different tricks work on different cats. The key is to be patient. **Remember, it took me three months to get my cats on 100% canned food.** Most cats, however, should not take this long.

## [Home-Prepared and Commercial Raw Meat Diets](#)

Many people have a strong negative reaction to the idea of feeding their carnivore raw meat but this *is* what a carnivore is designed to eat. Keep in mind that there are no hibachis or stoves in the wild. Also, wild cats do not always consume their prey in its entirety immediately upon killing it so the meat that they eat is not always from a fresh kill.

Cats are very different from humans with respect to their susceptibility to 'food poisoning'. Cats have a **much shorter transit time through their intestinal tract** than humans do (about 12 - 16 hours for the cat versus 35-55 hours for the human). This is a very important point because the more time bacteria spend in the intestinal tract, the more they multiply, eventually leading to intestinal upset.

Cats are designed to eat raw meat.

A properly handled and prepared raw meat diet has much less bacteria in it than many commercial dry foods. Commercial pet foods may also contain high levels of mold toxins from grains which are never a danger in a grainless raw meat diet.

Please see the Pet Food Recall section on the *Making Cat Food* page at [catinfo.org](http://catinfo.org) that discusses the common contamination issues associated with dry food.

There are several ways to feed a raw meat diet. One way is to prepare the diet yourself using a very simple recipe. This is my preference so that I can control the ingredients that go into the diet and control how it is prepared including how the meats are sourced. My cats have been thriving for the past 6 years on a raw meat diet that I prepare using either ground whole carcass rabbit from a reputable farm, or whole meats (usually chicken thighs) from Whole Foods Market that I grind myself. I add just a few supplements to complete the diet.

People are often overwhelmed or intimidated by the idea of making their cat's food but, in reality, it's quite simple – **as long as you follow a balanced recipe**. I make a large batch of food once each month and freeze it. Making your own cat food doesn't mean slaving in the kitchen every day--trust me, if it did, I wouldn't be doing it.

One very common – and dangerous - mistake people make when feeding a home-prepared diet is thinking that a cat can live on meat alone - without bones as a source of calcium. While meat *must* be the primary component of a feline diet, there is not enough calcium in meat (without the bones) to ensure that a safe calcium-to-phosphorus ratio is achieved. **Always remember that calcium is not an optional “supplement,” but a very critical component of the diet.** The bones must be ground with the meat (preferable), or bone meal must be added to the recipe. (I am a stickler for using real bone – not bone meal.)

Another way to feed a raw meat diet is to purchase ready-to-feed frozen commercial pet diets. Many people feed these diets with great results. Unfortunately, as is also true with canned foods, these products vary a great deal with respect to quality and ingredients. Many of these products contain items such as vegetables in a much higher quantity than would be found in a cat's natural diet. Plus, the vegetables in these diets are obviously not *predigested as they would be if consumed with the cat's prey*. This is a very important point that many people seem to forget when deciding to feed vegetables to carnivores. Cats do not have a physiologic requirement for vegetables and actually lack the enzymes needed to break down this food source for efficient utilization.

If you choose to feed a commercially prepared raw pet food, you must do some homework. One specific issue to look at is the percentage of vegetables, and occasionally fruits, that the product contains. My favorite commercial raw diet is Feline's Pride. It is grain-free and vegetable-free. Nature's Variety Medallions is another quality product. NV contains 95% meat/bones/organs and only 5% vegetable/fruit matter. This is a reasonable blend. Many products do not list this value on the packaging so a call to the company will be necessary or ask your local raw pet food retailer for product literature which may, or may not, list the breakdown of ingredients on a percentage-basis.

Some commercial raw pet diets are prepared without any vegetable matter. They are simply meat, bones and organs. Be aware, however, that a diet prepared with a large amount of *necks* and *backs* (common ingredients in commercial products) does not have an optimal calcium-to-phosphorus ratio. There is very little meat, when compared to the amount of bone, on this part of the animal. This leads to a diet that is too high in calcium relative to the phosphorus which can cause constipation in addition to other medical problems.

### **Some Final Thoughts**

Congratulations if you have made it to this point in this article. You must really care about feeding your cat a healthy diet and are open to new ideas regarding their nutritional needs. This paper has outlined what I feel is optimal nutrition for an obligate carnivore. The most common complaint that I hear from people is that their cat will NOT eat canned food and will ONLY eat dry food.

My cats fell into this category which was not surprising since they had been on a 100 percent dry food diet their entire lives and ranged in age from 5-10 years at the time of the transition to a healthier diet. It took me several months to convince them that they are **carnivores and need meat** – and not in a dry, overly processed form that also includes far too many carbohydrates and too little water. It was a little rough, at times, since two of my cats get very crabby with their housemates when they are hungry. These boys were

occasionally taken into a separate room during the transition period and fed some dry food because I do not like unrest in my home.

Surprisingly, one of my most stubborn dry food addicts is now happily eating a home-prepared raw meat/bones/organs diet that he actually likes better than the canned food. To be very honest, it does my heart good to see my little carnivores gnawing on raw meat – eating a diet that was meant for their species. My cats are now eating a species-appropriate diet consisting of raw meats (chicken and rabbit), finely ground bones, and organs using a **properly balanced recipe**.

Some people feed part homemade and part commercial canned for variety and convenience. I usually feed commercial canned food only a few times/year – preferring to stick with the food that I make for them.

I no longer feed any dry food and can't imagine ever feeding my cats this type of diet again. When I first started the diet transition, I was going to be satisfied with 'giving in' to my dry food addicts and letting their diet consist of 10-20 percent dry food, but I have no desire to feed my cats an unhealthy diet ever again. Moreover, I've come to understand and see first hand that cats do not need, or benefit from, *any* dry food in their diet. They also do not need access to food 24 hours a day, and that if they're eating two or more filling and nutrition-packed meals daily, they're eating optimally.

Many people who are at work all day worry that their cat will suffer without access to food continuously. But remember--having access to food 24/7 is not how your cat would eat in her natural environment. A healthy cat will not perish if she does not have food available at all times and, in fact, a cat that has worked up a healthy appetite will, with time, reward you by eating a hearty (and healthy) meal with gusto when she's hungry.

An added note about leaving canned food out: Keep in mind that a cat's gastrointestinal tract is much different from ours. I routinely leave canned food out for up to 12 hours at a time for my foster cats and kittens. I have been doing this for many years and hundreds of cats and kittens have passed through my foster room without experiencing any problems from this practice. If the weather is extra warm, I will try to visit my foster room a bit more often but if my schedule does not permit it, then I still do not worry about leaving the canned food out.

If you are worried about leaving canned food out and your cat is a bit of a 'nibbler', you can leave part of his meal out for him at a normal temperature and part of it frozen. The frozen portion will thaw within a few hours and will add some time to the 'freshness' of the food.

Everyone's lives are different and there are several ways to successfully feed your cat high quality nutrition. The goal of this paper is to arm you with knowledge about the special dietary needs of your cat so you can make an informed decision on how and what to feed while striking a balance that works for both of you.

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