



Adult Cat

WHAT DO CATS NEED TO THRIVE?

Giving cats what they need for a long, healthy life starts with nutrition. But if you want your cat to thrive, you will want to provide more than just food and water. As long-time feline fanciers know, many cats are quite social and enjoy daily attention from their owners, no matter how self-reliant they may seem.

Here's an overview of the essentials — with an emphasis on nutrition — so you can help your cat thrive.



Food and water

Cats, like people, have complex nutritional needs. While it may be challenging to understand every facet and nuance of your cat's dietary requirements, you don't need to look far beyond your cat's food bowl.

That's because most commercial cat foods provide nutritionally complete and balanced diets for cats.

To better understand how nutrition supports and promotes overall cat health, let's look at how key nutrients from food influence those body systems most associated with outward signs of health.

■ Skin and coat system

Dietary protein is required for normal skin and hair health, with 25% to 30% of the daily protein requirement being used by skin and hair. Omega-6 fatty acids help maintain smooth, healthy skin and a lustrous coat, while omega-3 fatty acids help control inflammation in the skin. Both types of fatty acids provide skin cells with flexibility that in turn contributes to skin's protective function. Vitamin E, an antioxidant, scavenges damaging free radicals that result from ultraviolet light exposure, while the B vitamin niacin helps skin retain moisture. Key minerals help maintain healthy skin and even coat color.

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■ Digestive system

A substantial amount (20% to 50%) of dietary protein is used by cells of the small intestine.^{1,2} Protein and amino acids are required to help the absorptive cells of the intestines to grow and function, thus enabling nutrient absorption. Amino acids and protein are also needed to maintain and regenerate gut-associated immune cells and to produce antibodies.

Insoluble fibers, an indigestible carbohydrate, promote normal intestinal function as they add bulk to intestinal contents and tend to absorb water. Some soluble fibers, or prebiotic fibers, are fermented by beneficial bacteria in the intestines, producing an energy source for intestinal cells and helping to inhibit growth of potentially harmful bacteria.

The antioxidant nutrients — vitamins C and E, beta-carotene and selenium — help protect the digestive tract from damaging free radicals and support the immune system.

■ Immune system

Nutrients such as protein and amino acids, fatty acids, vitamins C and E, and trace minerals all play a critical role in supporting the immune system. Omega-3 fatty acids, found in marine oils and fish, help control inflammation. The trace mineral zinc is essential for maintaining immune cells and their activities.

■ Musculoskeletal system

Proteins play an important role in building, maintaining and healing muscles, bones, ligaments and tendons. Vitamin D has key roles in normal bone growth, calcification and maintenance, while vitamin A helps with bone growth. Calcium and phosphorus are minerals critical for strong bones and teeth. Calcium, magnesium and potassium are essential for normal muscle contraction and nerve impulse transmission.

■ Nervous system and special senses

DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) is an omega-3 fatty acid found in marine oils and fish that supports brain and vision development, helping keep cats' vision sharp. Taurine, an essential amino acid for cats, is necessary for normal structure of the retina, the part of the eye that contains millions of light-sensitive cells that enable vision. Vitamin A is an essential component of a light-sensitive pigment that helps the eye adjust to changes in light intensity.

■ Body condition

To help your cat live a long, healthy life, you will want to provide enough food to meet his or her nutritional requirements, yet have your cat maintain an ideal body condition. The feeding guidelines on the food package offer a good starting point on how much to feed. Then regular monitoring of your cat's body condition can help you determine if you need to adjust the amount of food you are feeding.

Attention and love

Cats may have a reputation for being independent, low-maintenance pets, but they still bond with their owners and enjoy – even crave – their owners' company, attention and affection. Be sure to spend plenty of time with your cat so that your pet becomes properly socialized. Without enough stimulation or contact with their owners or other pets, cats can become bored, depressed and even develop problem behaviors.

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Exercise — disguised as play

While cats are fond of sleeping, they also benefit from moving every day. Cats are naturally curious and need some type of activity every day. Activities that allow cats to exercise their natural instincts, such as stalking, pouncing and running, help keep cats' minds alert and active. Playtime also keeps muscles toned and strong, helps maintain a healthy body condition and even lowers kitty stress levels.

A comfortable living space

Make sure your home is comfortable and stimulating for your cat. From providing opportunities to climb and explore safely to making sure your cat feels secure and comfortable while eating or napping, there is a lot you can do to make sure your cat feels at home.

Tags and identification

If allowed outdoors, make sure your cat can always find his or her way home. A collar with an identification tag that includes your cat's name and your phone number can make it simple for anyone who finds your cat to contact you. For additional reassurance, have your veterinarian implant a microchip under your cat's skin, which will help shelters and other organizations find you. You may want to consider a collar and tag or microchip even if your cat is an indoor cat, since it is possible for your cat to inadvertently escape from your home.

Supplies

Make sure you have sturdy food and water bowls, an accessible litter box that is frequently cleaned, somewhere for your cat to scratch and climb, and a comfortable place for your cat to sleep.

Veterinary health care

Cats, even those that spend most of their time indoors, need routine preventive veterinary care to help them live a long, healthy life. Regular check-ups can help avoid medical emergencies by detecting health conditions or problems before they become significant, painful or more difficult or costly to treat. Veterinary consults are also a good time to ask the veterinary health care team any questions you may have about your cat's health and behavior.

References

1. Van Der Schoor, S. R., Reeds, P. J., Stoll, B., Henry, J. F., Rosenberger, J. R., Burrin, D. G., & Van Goudoever, J. B. (2002). The high metabolic cost of a functional gut. *Gastroenterology*, 123(6), 1931–1940. doi:10.1053/gast.2002.37062
2. Stoll, B., Henry, J., Reeds, P. J., Yu, H., Jahoor, F., & Burrin, D. G. (1998). Catabolism dominates the first-pass intestinal metabolism of dietary essential amino acids in milk protein-fed piglets. *Journal of Nutrition*, 128(3), 606–614. doi:10.1093/jn/128.3.606

The Purina Institute aims to help put nutrition at the forefront of pet health discussions by providing user-friendly, science-based information that helps pets live longer, healthier lives.