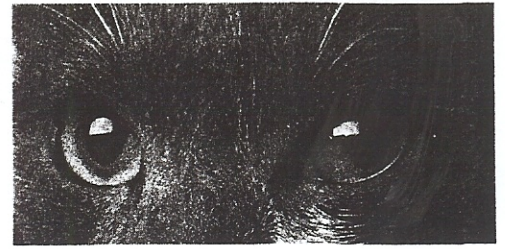


Something to Chew On!



Your Information Source on Pet Nutrition

Feeding the Young Cat

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Despite the advances in nutrition research, little remains known about what exactly constitutes an optimal diet for the cat. While guidelines do exist regarding the minimum and maximum requirements for a feline diet, much still needs to be done to determine the effects of various excesses and deficiencies on feline nutrition.

The young cat is particularly susceptible to nutritional imbalances and feeding errors. Dietary habits established post-weaning in many ways determine the future health status of a cat. Pet owners must be made aware of the unique nutritional requirements found in the cat. Particularly significant are the differences in nutritional requirements between dogs and cats, such as the higher requirement for protein and the greater tolerance for fat in cats when compared to dogs. Similarly, unlike dogs, cats require a constant dietary intake of taurine as their ability to synthesise taurine is very limited. Other characteristics particular to felines is their inability to convert linoleic acid to arachidonic acid, beta-carotene to vitamin A, or tryptophan to niacin.

Weaning of kittens should generally start around 3 weeks of age, at which time they should be encouraged to eat solid food. This is accomplished by feeding finely diced moist cat food, dry food soaked in water or milk, or a gruel made with milk and/or meat baby food/cat food. The amount of milk in the

gruel is gradually reduced until only solid food is being fed. The ability to digest the lactose found in milk gradually lessens as kittens get older, and some cats may become intolerant to milk as adults due to a lack of the enzyme, lactase, which breaks down lactose. Kittens should be fully weaned by seven to eight weeks of age.

Following weaning, kittens should be placed on a high-quality, energy-dense diet. Whether or not kittens require a specialty kitten food remains debatable. While kittens fed cat food with protein levels in the 28% range will grow at acceptable rates and develop normally, levels in the 30-35% range can be recommended since growing kittens have higher protein requirements (approximately 10%) than adult cats. Calcium and phosphorous levels must also be within strict parameters in order to avoid excesses or deficiencies of these minerals which could cause bone deformities.

Owners must be made aware of the tendency for cats to become habituated to a single food or flavour very early in life. If fed only one type of food or flavour, imprinting can be severe enough to result in some cats choosing to starve rather than switch diets later on in life. To avoid habituation, kittens should be exposed to a wide variety of foods, flavours, and

textures early on in life (preferably before six months of age). Nutritional deficiencies (and excesses) are also less likely to manifest themselves later on in life if a variety of diets are fed. Introduction to a new food should be gradual so as not to cause digestive disturbances.

Vitamin supplementation is rarely indicated in young cats and may be contraindicated in some. Most pet foods tend to contain an excess of vitamins to allow for storage losses and supplementation may serve to upset the balance of nutrients in the diet.

Label recommendations regarding how much and how often to feed should be used as a guideline, but cannot be relied upon exclusively when feeding kittens. Level of activity, health status, endoparasitic status, quality of the diet and many other factors also determine the quantity that needs to be fed. The criteria of normal weight gain and physical development are the best way to determine that the kitten is well-nourished. Pet owners should be advised not to restrict feeding in growing kittens, but rather feed ad libitum whatever the kittens are able to consume. Neither excessive growth rate nor obesity due to overeating are problems in growing kittens.

After six months of age, young cats do not need to be fed a kitten diet, but can be fed a diet suitable for adult cats. As well, the frequency of feeding can be reduced.



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