



Fresh & Raw Food Diet for Cats

BY SUSAN L. BEAL, DVM

The idea behind these recommendations is to provide a diet that approximates the food that cats have evolved eating (and will still eat, given a choice).

Cats are carnivores, and have little or no requirement for grains in their diets. They do have a requirement for some vegetables and greens, and cats in the wild will obtain this via the gut content of their prey and by seeking out specific plants on which to graze.

Therefore, these recommendations consider both the content of the diet and the frequency of feeding.

A cat's natural diet includes both meat and vegetable matter. On making a kill, the wild cat will eventually consume most of the carcass. They begin by eating the contents of the abdominal cavity – liver, stomach, intestines and their contents, followed by the other organs in the abdomen and chest cavities. The last part of the carcass the cat will eat is the muscle meat and bones, and perhaps the head, hide and feet. In addition to mammals and birds, cats will also eat insects and other small prey such as lizards. Cats will also graze on herbs and wild plants, seeking out specific types of plants.

This is the diet we are trying to imitate.

Healthy adult cats can be fed once or twice daily. Your cat should have access to the food for 20-30 minutes, after which any remaining

food should be discarded. Nothing further should be given, except water, until the next meal.

These breaks between meals give the digestive tract time to fully process the food, to rest and regenerate, to optimize enzyme formation, and to cleanse before being asked to work again. By feeding once or twice daily, we see that our companions come to their meal hungry and will eat with gusto. The periodic fasts mimic the feast and famine cycle of the wild cat – who eats when it is a successful hunter.

This schedule should be tailored to the individual situation based on the cat's age, health status, special needs and family schedule.

It is important to recognize there is no single diet that meets the needs of every cat. A good starting point is to begin by offering a diet that is approximately 80-85% meat, with the remaining portion being made up of vegetables and a small amount of overcooked grain (15% vegetables and 5% or less grain) measured by volume. Once the cat has been on this diet for a time, it can be fine-tuned for the individual.

The grain portion of the diet should be overcooked, enhancing the digestibility and mimicking the partially digested grains found in the stomach of the prey. Cook the grains at least twice as long as you normally would and add extra water. This will result in a mushy, porridge-like consistency of the grain portion of the diet.

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Grain choices include (but are not limited to) oatmeal, barley, wheat, millet, spelts, quinoa, grits, bulgar, couscous, rices and pastas. Whole and raw grains are preferable to processed grains.

The vegetable portion may be raw, lightly steamed or sautéed, puréed, finely chopped, ground or juiced. The processing simulates partial predigestion and is done to break down the plant fibers, making the material more digestible to the cat. Vegetable choices vary with season and availability. Fresh is better than frozen, and frozen better than canned.

Some options are carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, squash, zucchini, celery, parsley, yams, green beans, pumpkin, and sprouts. Produce needs to be washed thoroughly to remove any pesticide and herbicide residues.

The meat portion should be given raw or lightly cooked. A portion of the meat should be provided as organ meats (liver or kidneys), the rest as muscle meats. Heart and gizzards are considered to be muscle meats, not organ meats. Some cats will eat these meats combined, while others prefer them separated by meals. Either way is fine, provided the overall balance of ingredients is maintained over time.

Cats have a higher total fat requirement than do humans. If you are taking advantage of the superior nutritional qualities of grass-fed beef, you will have to add more fat to the meat than is present in this naturally low fat product. You can achieve this by asking the butcher to add more fat to the grind, or by supplementing with extra fat such as leaf fat or suet, or by combining these lean meats with a higher fat meat such as beef liver or chicken or pork. You want the fat content of the meat portion

of the meals to be in the 25-30% range. It is important to make these transitions slowly to allow time for the individual animals to adapt.

Some cats, once they are used to the fresh and raw food diet, will enjoy raw bony meats – Cornish hens, rabbits, chicken wings and necks,.... The bony meats should be given raw to the bones will be soft, pliable and digestible. Cooked bones may pose a health hazard to some cats.

Ingredients produced without chemicals and pesticides are optimal. However, the lack of availability of such sources, organic or otherwise, should not prohibit you from providing a fresh, whole food diet. Explore options such as home grown products, farmers markets, direct purchases from family farms,... Fresh and whole foods, even from the supermarkets, are far superior to any packaged and processed commercial food.

The Calcium: Phosphorus balance of the meat portion of the diet must be corrected for cats who are not receiving raw nutritional bones. To do so, add 1,200 mg elemental calcium per pound (approximately two cups) of boneless meat fed. Food-grade bone meal may also be

used at one tablespoon per pound of boneless meat.

If the meat is not fresh, or is fed cooked, it is advisable to correct the taurine levels in the meats. Cooking removes most of the taurine found in meats. The daily taurine content of the wild feline diet is about 25 to 50 mg, and this amount has been found adequate for most cats.

Many cats (and their caregivers) may need to be introduced to this type of diet slowly to allow

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their systems to adjust. With some cats, it's as easy as mixing a small portion of vegetables, overcooked grains and cooked ground meat with the usual diet, maintaining the same total volume of food. Over a period of 7-10 days, increase the home-prepared portion and decrease the commercial portion. Other cats may be more difficult to convert to fresh and raw foods, and some dedication and persuasion on the part of the caregiver may be required.

You'll have to explore a bit to determine where your cat/s are in the process. More information is available in additional handouts from this clinic as well as at these sites: www.littlebigcat.com and www.catinfo.org

While the cat must be allowed to become a bit hungry during the transition time, it is important that s/he eats something every day. That may mean that the cat needs to be provided a small portion of the usual diet – not enough to satiate him, but enough to meet his basic needs and supply some calories during the time of the transition to other types of foods. It goes without saying that s/he should be offered the new foods first, with the small old-style meal being provided once daily, and then only if the cat has not eaten any of the new food choices.

As you increase the whole food portion of the diet, you will see changes in your companion's appetite and relationship with food. S/he will come to the meal more enthusiastically, may have fewer food cravings and seem more smaller volume of food. As you monitor your companion's response to this fresh and whole food diet, you may need to make adjustments in the volume and proportion to

achieve and maintain optimal condition for the individual.

It is not unusual to see loose stools, or mucoid stools, as you make the transition to a fresh and whole food diet. This happens as the body adjusts to the new food and releases stored toxins from the system. Loose stools and mucous should present no problem, as long as the cat remains bright and active. Many cats will have smaller stools and/or more infrequent stools once they have been transitioned onto a fresh food diet. This is a normal response to a highly digestible diet.

The only two hard and fast rules with this diet are variety and moderation. As long as you keep this in mind, you will have your pet on a wholesome, nutritious and balanced diet.

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