

How to Choose the Best Food for Your Cat

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When choosing a cat food, make sure it is a complete, healthy food designed specifically for cats.

A cat's digestive health is essential for a long and healthy life, and digestive health starts with a quality diet. Cats have very different nutritional needs than any other animals because they are obligate carnivores, and their body structures have adapted to a strictly carnivorous diet. In fact, in the wild, cats naturally choose high quality, high protein foods.

Cats are unable to adjust to a low protein diet, and they are dependent on specific nutrients that can only be found in sufficient quantities in animal products. These nutrients include the amino acids arginine and taurine, the essential fatty acid arachidonic acid, and some vitamins. Cats require a preformed Vitamin A, which is present only in foods of animal origin, and may be listed in cat foods as retinyl palmitate or acetate.

You may be wondering, 'how much protein is enough'? The Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) has determined that adult cat foods must have a minimum protein level of 26% on a dry matter basis; kittens and reproductively active animals must have 30% on a dry matter basis. Some cat food manufacturers exceed AAFCO standards for protein and go well beyond 30% on a dry matter basis. The source of the protein is also an important consideration. Real meat, poultry, fish or egg are highly-digestible sources and, for cats, are considered superior to by-product or grain sources.

You should also know that pet food is available in three major categories: "grocery store" foods, premium foods, and healthy foods.

- **"Grocery store" foods** - These are the foods found in grocery stores and mass-market retailers. They are typically made to be more economical and contain lower-quality, less-digestible, and inexpensive ingredients. While easy on the pocketbook, "grocery store" foods normally do not provide your pet with the healthiest, most nutrient-dense ingredients, so are not as beneficial for your pet.

Their energy values may be lower, their proteins are often lower-grade (and therefore less digestible), and you need to feed more to have your pet receive the same nutrition as when eating a higher quality food. Unfortunately, this can lead to a larger quantity of stool (and more mess in the litter box).

You're also likely to see artificial preservatives in these foods, like ethoxyquin, BHA, and BHT, as well as a number of by-products. Many times the pet food company that produces the food follows a set recipe created for them by their manufacturing facility, and often these facilities use the least expensive ingredients available that still meet the desired levels of certain nutrients without taking into consideration whether your pet will be able to digest or absorb the nutrients because of their quality. A standard pet food like this will often short-change your pet's health.

- **Premium foods** - These are often considered the "name brand" pet foods. They can be found in grocery stores, pet stores, and veterinarian offices. These contain higher-grade ingredients, including quality protein sources, but may still include some elements of "grocery store" food, such as artificial colors, artificial flavors, and chemical preservatives. Premium foods are usually more expensive than "grocery store" foods because of their higher-quality ingredients, and are therefore somewhat more beneficial and digestible.
- **Healthy foods** - The newest addition to the pet food market, Healthy foods represent an evolution in quality. They provide pets with the highest-quality, and most nutritious ingredients without some of the problem ingredients in premium or "grocery store" foods. All of the [Drs. Foster and Smith Cat Foods](#) fall into this category.

Pet owners are becoming increasingly familiar with the benefits of feeding their pets Healthy foods, and the popularity and scope of Healthy foods continues to grow - which is great because that means more pets are eating better food and benefiting greatly from this better nutrition.

In Healthy foods, higher quality ingredients are used - such as real meat, fish, or poultry protein sources as one of the first two ingredients, whole fruits and vegetables, and specific vitamins and minerals for the particular lifestage formula of the food. Here's what you can expect from Healthy foods:

- Fresh, wholesome protein sources such as real meat, poultry or fish (NOT meat by-products) as one of the first two ingredients, to strengthen muscles.
- Quality carbohydrate sources from whole grains like brown rice, barley, oats and brewer's rice to help maximize energy.
- Fiber from real vegetable sources such as potatoes or beet pulp to help maintain healthy digestion and bowel function.
- Vitamin-rich vegetables and fruits such as sweet potatoes, carrots, apples, and cranberries to offer natural sources of easily-absorbed nutrients and antioxidant nutrients.
- Natural fat sources like sunflower and fish oils to supply energy and help maintain skin and coat health.
- Natural preservatives such as Vitamin E, mixed tocopherols and citric acid, to slow the process of fat oxidation which causes food to spoil.

Healthy foods also contain no artificial preservatives, flavors, or colors. They cost a little more, but in the end they turn out to be a good value because they also contain more nutrition per ounce, so you can feed less to satisfy your pet's daily requirements. Feeding less means less waste in your litter box, too.

How do I Find a Healthy Cat Food?

You find a Healthy food by reading the label on the pet food. Regardless of what a pet food may claim on the front of its package, the proof is in the pudding (the ingredients list). By law, pet food labels must list their ingredients in order by weight. Therefore, those foods with quality protein sources like meat, fish, or poultry listed as the first or second ingredient contain higher levels of digestible, quality sources of protein.

Here are a couple other ingredients you might also find in Healthy foods: direct-fed microbials (pro-biotics) to support healthy digestion, and antioxidant nutrients to support the body's normal defenses. All Healthy foods will be fortified with vitamins and minerals to give your pet the nutrients required daily for optimal health.

Other Factors to Address Before Selecting a Cat Food:

- Your cat's age/life stage - make sure you choose a food that's nutritionally geared to your cat's age ([kitten](#), [adult](#), or [senior](#)).
- Your cat's body condition - cats that are [overweight](#) or underweight need different nutrition than those who are not. Choose a food that fits your cat's needs, whether it's weight control, maintenance, urinary tract health, or another formula.
- Your cat's health history - if your cat has medical conditions such as diabetes, allergies, or digestive difficulties, you'll need to consult your veterinarian and choose a food that is appropriate for that condition.
- Your budget - simply put, feed your cat the best food you can afford. Generally, the more you spend, the better-quality, healthier food you'll feed your pet.

Cats are individuals, just like people. They are beautiful, fascinating creatures with their own special preferences - some like chicken, and some like fish. Some cats like [canned food](#), some like [dry food](#), and some like a combination of the two.

Keep in mind that no one food is best for every cat. Luckily, today's market offers many well-formulated cat foods for cats at all life stages, and it's fine to try several to rule out food intolerances and determine which one works best for your cat.

As veterinarians, we firmly believe that your pet's good health starts from the inside out. We formulated our cat foods so that they do not contain artificial ingredients, preservatives, colors, flavors, or by-products. They contain only specially selected natural ingredients that meet or exceed [AAFCO standards](#). Real chicken meat provides essential amino acids for healthy tissues. Fresh, whole fruits and vegetables, full of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants promote a strong immune system and healthy cell growth. We've included Omega-3 fatty acids to help keep skin healthy as well as to promote a soft, lustrous coat. We even have probiotics to support the good bacteria in your cat's digestive system for overall better digestion.

After Selecting a Food, Monitor your Cat

After you've done all you can to make sure a food is healthy and beneficial for your cat, make sure you take ample time to switch your cat to the new food. Also, monitor your cat closely once she is fully switched and has been eating the new food for at least a month. Bright eyes, a shiny coat, and healthy energy levels will let you know you've chosen a good source for your cat's nutrition. If you need assistance selecting a food for your cat, seek veterinary/professional advice.