Feline Nutritional & Special Health Issues FAQs

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

- What is arachidonic acid, and why does my cat need it?
- Why does my cat need the active form of Vitamin A?
- Why does my cat need niacin?
- Does my senior cat have special dietary needs?

What is arachidonic acid, and why does my cat need it?
Arachidonic acid is one of the essential fatty acids. Dogs can manufacture arachidonic acid from linoleic acid or gamma-linolenic acid. Cats cannot. Arachidonic acid is necessary to produce an inflammatory response. In many cases, such as in allergies, the goal is to suppress the inflammatory response. But in other cases, the response is a necessary means by which the body can protect itself. Arachidonic acid also helps to regulate skin growth, is necessary for proper blood clotting, and is necessary for the reproductive and gastrointestinal systems to function properly. Arachidonic acid is found in animal fats which must therefore be included as part of the diet. Like dogs, cats also require linoleic acid, another fatty acid.
[Back to Top]

Why does my cat need the active form of Vitamin A?
Cats lack the enzyme which can convert beta-carotene to retinol, the active form of Vitamin A. Therefore, they require a preformed Vitamin A, which is present only in foods of animal origin, and is usually included in cat foods as retinyl palmitate. Deficiencies of Vitamin A are rare, but signs include night blindness, retarded growth, and poor-quality skin and coat.
[Back to Top]

Why does my cat need niacin?
Many animals can synthesize niacin, a B vitamin, from the amino acid tryptophan. Cats, however, can not manufacture niacin in sufficient quantities, thus require higher amounts in their diet. Niacin deficiencies can lead to loss of appetite and weight, inflamed gums, and hemorrhagic diarrhea.
[Back to Top]

Does my senior cat have special dietary needs?
Various disease processes may require dietary changes to lessen the effects or progression of the disease. Cats with colitis, constipation, or anal gland disease often benefit from diets with increased dietary fiber. Cats with diabetes mellitus may benefit from a diet high in fat and protein and low in carbohydrates. Cats with inflammatory bowel disease and colitis can benefit from diets which have highly digestible sources of protein, fat, and carbohydrates. Cats with heart disease may require a special diet with decreased amounts of sodium and increased amounts of the amino acid taurine. Cats with chronic kidney failure should be on diets with highly digestible protein so there are fewer breakdown products, which the kidneys are responsible for eliminating in the urine. Cats with dental and oral disease, who experience pain while eating hard food, may need to switch to canned food. Cats with cancer have special dietary needs; we recommend increasing omega-3 fatty acids in the diet.
[Back to Top]

Special Health Issues

- If I feed only canned food, what precautions should I take to protect my pet's teeth?
- Could your food be causing my pet's excess gas?
- Could your food be causing my pet's loose stools?

If I feed only canned food, what precautions should I take to protect my pet's teeth?
If your pet eats only canned food, you'll need to take extra precautions to ensure healthy teeth and gums. Brush your pet's teeth regularly, take your pet to the vet for regular dental exams, and provide your pet with plenty of chew toys and treats (such as rawhide bones) to remove the plaque and tartar that cause tooth decay and gum disease.
[Back to Top]

Could your food be causing my pet's excess gas?
Your pet's excess gas could be due to diet-related factors such as eating too quickly, eating too much, switching to a new diet too quickly, or changing the diet frequently. Minor amounts of gas are a normal part of your pet's digestive processes, and are to be expected. Major amounts of gas, however, are not typical, are unpleasant for you and your pet, and can often be remedied.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

Be sure that your pet doesn't eat too quickly, that he doesn't eat more food than he needs, and that you're not changing his food frequently without allowing enough time togradually change from the old food to the new. If adapting your pet's diet doesn't seem to help your pet's flatulence, consult your veterinarian.
[Back to Top]

Could your food be causing my pet's loose stools?
Loose stools (diarrhea) can be caused by a pet's diet. However, diet is not the only cause. Be sure to consult your veterinarian if your pet is experiencing loose stools, as they could be an indication of illness.

If your pet has consistently loose stools that are not related to a physical illness, first check your pet's food to be sure it is not expired or spoiled. If the food is indeed spoiled or past its expiration date, replace it immediately. If this does not alleviate the problem try feeding less of the food; sometimes inadvertent overfeeding can cause loose stools because pet foods are typically very nutrient-rich and easy to digest. You may also choose to try feeding several small meals throughout the day, rather than 1 or 2 large ones.

If feeding less food or feeding several smaller meals does not eliminate the problem of loose stools, your cat may have an intolerance to one or more ingredients in the food. You may wish to try a different food.

Remember, periods of loose stools can quickly cause dehydration and deprive your cat's body of necessary nutrients, so be sure to contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.
[Back to Top]

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*