Cat Food Protein FAQs

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Does a high protein percentage (as shown on the package) mean that a pet food is automatically better than others with lower percentages?
No, a higher percentage of protein doesn't mean that a pet food is automatically better than others with a lower percentage. Similarly, a lower protein percentage isn't automatically bad, provided that the protein included in the food comes from a good source (such as real chicken or real lamb meat). Don't rely solely on the percentage of crude protein shown in the guaranteed analysis on the package. While it is tempting to assume that a high percentage of protein means that a food contains a lot of beneficial protein (and is therefore better than comparable foods), this is not always the case. Always evaluate the *source* of the protein - not just the amount - when considering/comparing pet foods.
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Why do cats need protein?
Proteins are necessary for all aspects of growth and development and are very important in structural makeup and the immune system. In addition, they are burned as calories and can be converted to and stored as fat.

Cats actually require 22 amino acids (the building blocks that make up proteins). Cats can synthesize 11 of these amino acids; the remaining ones - essential amino acids - must be consumed. Essential amino acids for cats include: arginine, histidine, isoleucine, leucine, lysine, methionine, phenylalanine, threonine, tryptophan, valine, and taurine. A deficiency in any of the amino acids can cause health problems.
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Why do cats require a higher level of protein than dogs?
This may be due to cats' inability to regulate the rate at which liver enzymes break down protein. If dietary protein is in low quantities or not available, the cat's body will soon start breaking down the protein in its own muscle. To avoid this, cats must consistently consume a high level of protein.
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What is taurine, and why does my cat need it?
Taurine is an amino acid which is necessary for proper bile formation, eye health, and proper function of the heart. Cats require a high amount of taurine for their body functions, yet have limited enzymes which can produce taurine from other amino acids such as methionine and cysteine. Therefore, they need a diet high in taurine. If taurine is deficient, signs such as a heart condition called dilated cardiomyopathy, retinal degeneration, reproductive failure, and abnormal kitten development can occur.
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What is arginine, and why does my cat need it?
Arginine is an amino acid. Most animals manufacture the amino acid ornithine through various processes, some of which require arginine. In cats, the only method to produce ornithine is to convert it from arginine. Ornithine is necessary because it binds ammonia produced from the breakdown of protein. If cats are deficient in arginine, there will not be enough ornithine to bind the ammonia, and severe signs such as salivation, vocalization, ataxia, and even death can result from the high ammonia levels. These signs often occur several hours after a meal, when most of the ammonia is produced.
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Can I tell which proteins are better than others?

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Not all proteins are created equal, and some are better for pets than others. Every protein source contains different levels of amino acids and each protein is different in its ability to be broken down into amino acids. The ability of a protein to be used by the body and its amount of usable amino acids is termed biological value. Egg has the highest biological value and sets the standard by which other proteins are judged. Egg has a biological value of 100. Fish meal and milk are close behind with a value of 92. Beef is around 78 and soybean meal is 67. Meat and bone meal and wheat are around 50 and corn is 45. Things like hair and feathers would be very high in protein but would be down at the bottom of the list for biological value.
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Can I feed my cat too much protein?
If your cat eats too much protein, some will be excreted in the urine and the rest will be used as calories or converted to fat - causing your cat no harm. However, if your cat has a kidney problem, high protein diets are not recommended. Most pet food companies slightly exceed the minimum recommended protein requirements to ensure that cats get adequate protein from their food.
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How can I tell if my food has enough protein?
Generally, purchasing a reputable, quality brand of cat food that fits your cat's activity level will be just fine. However if your cat has special protein needs, or you want to find the best possible food for your budget, then you must interpret the often-confusing label.

Keep in mind that the protein level shown on the bag or can does not indicate the percentage of digestible protein, just the overall protein content. To roughly determine the amount of digestible protein, read the ingredients and note the order in which they appear. Ingredients are listed in order of weight. Chicken, beef, fish and lamb are very digestible, and if they are listed as the first ingredient on the label, you can assume the food is a good quality protein source. In addition to digestibility, the amino acid content is important. Most grains are low in one or more amino acids, and need to be combined with other sources to provide all of the essential amino acids.

It is a good idea to follow this general rule: try to find a food in the upper to middle price range. And keep in mind the highest-priced foods are not necessarily the best foods, and the lowest-priced foods are not always of poor quality.
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Does high protein cause kidney disease?
No. This myth probably started because, in the past, patients with kidney disease were commonly placed on low-protein (and thus low-nitrogen) diets. Today, we often put them on a diet that is not necessarily very low in protein, but instead contains protein that is more digestible (therefore producing fewer nitrogen by-products). These diet changes are made merely because damaged kidneys may not be able to handle the excess nitrogen efficiently. In pets with existing kidney problems, nitrogen can become too high in the bloodstream which can harm other tissues.

Unless your veterinarian has told you your pet has a kidney problem that is severe enough to adjust the protein intake, you can feed your pet a normal amount of protein without worrying about "damaging" or "stressing" your pet's kidneys. Also, keep in mind the fact that you are not "saving" your pet's kidneys by feeding a low-protein diet.
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Is meat meal good for my pet?
In its simplest, purest form, meat meal is meat with the water and fat removed. The dried meat is then ground into small granules or powder for use in pet food. Pure meat meal, as opposed to meat and bone meal or meat by-product meal, is a good source of concentrated protein which is nutritionally excellent for your pet. Pure meat meal cannot contain blood, hair, hoof, horn, hide trimmings, manure, or stomach or rumen contents, except for amounts that may be unavoidably included during processing. It cannot contain any added extraneous materials, and may not contain any more than 14 percent indigestive materials. Also, no more than 11 percent of the crude protein in the meal can be ingredients the cat cannot digest.
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