

CAT 7

# Staying in shape



**BLUE** FOR  
PETS  
**CROSS**

The charity dedicated to helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.



## **Staying in shape**

**As with people, cats need a combination of a healthy diet and regular exercise to stay in shape and live a long and healthy life.**

## Feeding your cat

There is a bewildering choice of cat food available in pet shops, supermarkets and from your vet, so how do you decide which is best?

Complete dry foods come in many types and usually have a variety of life stage options, from kittens through to old age. They are widely available and convenient to feed. Many owners leave food out for cats all the time and dry food is much more hygienic than wet food to feed in this way. However, some cats will overeat and become fat if fed like this – for these animals the quantity given each day should be restricted to a measured amount.

Wet foods come in tins, pouches or foil trays. They are usually palatable and look appetising. However, they are usually smellier than dry foods and can be unhygienic if you want to leave food out constantly as they tend to attract flies in the summer. Open packets and tins should be covered and stored in a fridge, but many cats will not eat the food cold, therefore, it needs to return to room temperature before feeding.

Some people like to feed home-made diets which they have prepared themselves from human foods such as raw or cooked butchers' meat and fish. This is the most complicated way to feed cats and is unlikely to provide a balanced diet, therefore, it is best avoided.

Some people ask about vegetarian diets for cats, but cats are obligate carnivores – this means that they must eat meat and cannot live a full and healthy life on a vegetarian diet.

Whatever you decide to feed, all cats need a constant supply of fresh water, which should be changed daily.

## Kittens up to one year old

Kittens need a food that can support their huge need for calories and all the important nutrients for growth. Many companies produce kitten or growth diets and it is important to feed these to young growing cats. Kittens' stomachs are relatively small, so they need several small meals each day.

- From eight to 12 weeks, four meals daily
- From three to six months, three meals daily
- From six months onwards, two meals daily

The best way to determine how much to feed your kitten is to read the feeding guide on the pack. Start by feeding the smallest recommended quantity for the age of your kitten and increase this only if your kitten starts to look thin. The feeds should all be the same and should be either a good quality complete dry growth diet or tinned kitten food.

Never feed milk or other dairy products to kittens – they cannot digest them

properly and are likely to cause diarrhoea. Kittens have no need for milk once they have left their mother. There are artificial cat-milk substitutes available to buy but these are an unnecessary expense.

## Adult cats

When your cat reaches adulthood, you can change from a growth diet to normal adult cat food. There are choices of dry food or wet, but the important thing is to find a food that suits your cat and stick to it. Swapping and changing can result in an upset stomach, so if you have to change your cat's diet, do so over a few days, gradually introducing the new food and reducing the old food. This will minimise the risk of an upset stomach.

It will not do any harm to your cat to have different flavours of the same type of food, and many foods are sold in packs containing mixed flavours. However, cats that become used to a lot of variety may become picky eaters and you will find yourself constantly having to pander to their whims.

The quantity you need to feed depends on the size and exercise level of your cat, so follow the feeding guide and adjust the quantity to make sure your cat maintains a healthy weight. As with kittens, the best option is to feed the smallest quantity recommended and increase this only if the cat looks thin.



A lean cat is likely to live longer, have more energy and be much less prone to disease than a cat that is allowed to become overweight.

## What if my cat doesn't eat?

Assuming your cat is lively and healthy, there is no need to worry about missing a couple of meals. However, if a cat that usually has a good appetite suddenly stops eating, or if the cat also has other symptoms such as diarrhoea, contact your vet for advice.

If your cat regularly leaves food you may be feeding too much, so reduce the quantity and do not increase it until you reach a point where the cat is eating properly again. You can then increase the quantity gradually until the cat is eating a normal amount of food for their age and size. Several small meals daily may be better for some cats than two large ones.

## Neutering

Many people believe that neutering makes cats fat. This is not the case, but neutered cats do need fewer calories. Therefore, after your cat is neutered, reduce their food intake by about a quarter, until you see what effect neutering has had. If your cat begins to lose weight, you can gradually increase the meal size again.

## Older cats

As cats get older, their nutritional needs change. In general, they need fewer calories and may also need other changes to their diet if they are starting to develop any illness associated with ageing (such as kidney or heart disease). Your vet will be able to advise you regarding specific illness but, in general, you will need to feed less food and should consider changing to a complete food specifically for older cats. This is a time when you will need to watch your cat's weight carefully to prevent middle age spread!

## Overweight cats

Prevention is much better than cure, as cats that have been fat once will always be prone to weight gain. You should

be able to feel your cat's ribs easily when you stroke their body lightly and, from above, you should clearly see a waistline. If your cat is becoming overweight, start by reducing the amount you feed by about a quarter. Alternatively, you can try changing onto a light diet. These are usually complete dry foods manufactured for less active or slightly overweight cats. They contain fewer calories than normal adult cat foods. You will still need to keep a close check to make sure your cat is losing weight and not getting any fatter.

The other important part of weight loss is exercise. Increasing the amount of exercise your cat gets, by playing with your pet, will also help them become leaner and fitter.

For further information, see the pet care leaflet, *Getting back in shape* (C8).





of time every day playing a game that encourages your cat to be physically active. A bored cat will not exercise willingly and will tend to spend a lot of time sleeping, so you need to spend a lot of time keeping your indoor cat occupied and healthy.

Treat balls are a good idea as you can fill them with some of the normal daily food allowance and then let the cat work for its food by chasing the ball until the treats fall out – this fulfils the natural hunting instinct as well as making the cat exercise and work off some calories.

Cats that are allowed outdoors usually exercise more than indoor cats, because they are more stimulated. However, some cats are naturally lazy and still need your encouragement to be active.

Kittens need lots of exercise to keep them occupied and to build strong muscles. They also need to learn skills for adult life such as chasing and climbing. Activity centres which give cats climbing opportunities are a great idea, as are any games involving chasing, such as ping-pong balls or feathers on sticks. However, kittens must also sleep a lot between play times, so it is important that they get the chance to snooze after a period of activity. You will need to make sure that children leave them alone to rest.

For further information, see the pet care leaflet, *Caring for your kitten (C2)*.

## Treats

Many cats enjoy treats, but all treats contain calories. This means you need to think about how many, and what type of treats to give, when deciding how much to feed your cat. If your cat has had more treats than normal one day, reduce the amount of food given that day to compensate.

## Exercise

All cats need exercise to help them keep fit and healthy and also to keep them relaxed and happy. Their exercise needs change with age and vary depending on whether they are indoor or outdoor cats.

Cats that are kept indoors will need your encouragement to exercise. Find out what toys they like and spend plenty

## Exercise for older cats

As your cat ages, less exercise is required, and this is when you need to be reducing their calorie intake too. Older cats still enjoy a game now and then, but spend more time sleeping, so they must have less to eat than young active cats. As they get really old, hearing and eyesight may be impaired, so it becomes harder for them to exercise safely outdoors. Encourage gentle play indoors instead and your older cat will continue to enjoy it. It does a lot of good to keep cats active into old age.



# Happy, healthy pets

**Blue Cross** advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)

**Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:**

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
- latest news
- events near you
- pets needing new homes

**Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.**



## Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

## How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

**Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)**



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