

THE FEEDING AND NUTRITION OF KITTENS

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FEEDING PROPERLY FOR GOOD HEALTH

Kittens bounce off walls, propel themselves through the air and pounce at warp speed toward anything that moves, especially toys. The only time they seem to slow down is to wash their faces after a satisfying meal.

And what could be more satisfying than a meal that supplies all the necessary nutrients. Meeting your kittens nutritional needs is important to provide for her rapid growth rate and boundless energy.

YOUR KITTEN'S GROWTH

At birth, she weighs about three ounces (100 grams) and gains about 1/2 ounce (15 grams) each day. By 10 weeks of age, she'll weigh more than two pounds (1 kilogram), a tenfold gain in 10 weeks. Although males and females grow similarly at first, males begin to outweigh females by 10 weeks of age. Males tend to increase in weight until about 11 months of age, about four to eight weeks longer than female kittens do. The growth for both sexes is rapid at first, through about six to seven months of age. Males continue at this pace until about nine months of age, leaving their sisters behind.

THE FEEDING REGIMEN

Right from birth, food is critical. On mom's milk up to weaning at around ten weeks of age, your kitty will begin to eat solid food at about three to four weeks of age. At this time, with few teeth and a tender tummy, a soft meat-based (canned food) diet is more easily consumed.

WHEN WEANING ENDS

After weaning, a balanced complete diet provides all the nutrients – energy, protein, vitamins, minerals – in proper proportion and amount. Though foods specially formulated for kittens are more nutrient-dense, a diet for “all stages” – one that can be fed to kittens and adults – may be fed as well. Both diets provide for the increased demand of your kitten's growth. Although your kitten requires the entire complement of nutrients, calcium, phosphorus, zinc, vitamin A, vitamin D, thiamine, essential fatty acids and taurine are especially important. For example, a diet that's otherwise sufficient but deficient in one nutrient, such as zinc, can result in poor growth, dermatitis (skin lesions) and other deformities.

IT HAS TO TASTE GOOD

Your kitten should eat well as long as the food is tasty. Palatability is based on aroma, texture and taste. If your kitten is fed a variety of flavors, she'll probably be a less-selective eater as an adult. As your kitten matures, a complete and balanced dry food may be fed in addition to canned food. Feeding should be consistent, not switching back and forth, to avoid digestive upset or diarrhea. It isn't essential to offer a variety of food types, though feeding canned and dry is fine, as long as it is palatable and sufficiently eaten to provide enough nutrition. For younger kittens, ease of eating is important; a soft diet or small pieces is best. To make it easier to consume, dry food may be moistened with warm water.

BEWARE OF "ADULTS ONLY"

Specially formulated kitten foods are higher in protein and energy density. Dry kitten foods contain about 35 percent protein, have a higher fat content, about 12 to 24 percent, and are about 25 percent higher in calories than adult dry cat foods. If a food is labeled "100 percent complete and balanced for all life stages," it's okay to feed to your kitten. Don't feed him a food labeled for "maintenance," which is for adults only.

CAN YOU OVERFEED?

At a very young age, up to three to four months, it's almost impossible to overfeed your kitty. At 10 weeks of age, he needs 250 kilocalories of energy per kilogram of body weight per day or about two and a half to three ounces of dry food, or eight to nine ounces of canned food. At four to six months of age, your kitten's daily requirement for energy is about 100 to 130 kilocalories per kilogram of body weight, closer to that of an adult cat (70 to 80 kcal/kg body weight), as growth of body tissues slows down. Between eight months to a year of age, most kittens reach adult body size and weight. The daily food requirement at adulthood is about 1 ounce of canned food or one half ounce of dry food per pound of body weight.

HAS YOUR KITTEN LOST HIS APPETITE?

As your kitten plays, your concern for his food needs should be primarily for a good quality, balanced diet. Consult your veterinarian with any concerns; however, if your kitten is playfully frisky, you and he are doing just fine. If your kitten doesn't eat for 48 hours, consult your veterinarian. If symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhea or fever accompany a lack of appetite, see your veterinarian immediately. In these cases, lack of water intake or dehydration (excessive water loss) is more critical than lack of food consumption.

NUTRIENT NEEDS

In comparison to other animals, as true carnivores, the cat and kitten have unique nutrient needs. Since they've evolved as meat-eaters, many of these needs are associated with their meaty diet, not obtainable from plant sources. Their requirement for a higher protein level, pre-formed vitamin A, niacin, essential fatty acids and taurine are based on this fact. They cannot convert carotene to vitamin A, getting it naturally from the organ meats of prey. Similarly, cats cannot metabolize niacin from tryptophan (an amino acid), can use only essential fatty acids from animal fat sources and need taurine from muscle tissue.