

Natural Diets for Cats

Discover the health benefits of natural foods.

By Lisa Hanks

Holistic practitioners say that a properly formulated natural diet can elevate your cat's health to a whole new level. Although hard, scientific evidence still is lacking, experience and case studies show positive results.

Monique Maniet, a Bethesda, Md.-based veterinarian certified with the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society and the Academy of Veterinary Homeopathy, touts the benefits of a grain-free, raw-meat diet. "Cats develop shinier coats, greater energy and alertness, and they lose excess weight," Maniet says. "Plus, you end up with smaller, less-smelly stools — a wonderful side-effect."

But you can't just pull any bag off the shelf that says "natural." You must be selective. It takes dedication and knowledge to sort through the often confusing natural-diet options and discover the optimum choice for you and your cat. It's vital to work with a holistic veterinarian or veterinary nutritionist to provide a balanced diet.

The choices and philosophies vary widely. In addition to meat diets, you might see diets that include meaty bones (with or without grains, fruits, vegetables and supplements), and these might be raw, partially cooked or fully cooked, ground or whole, homemade or commercially produced, and fresh, freeze-dried, dehydrated or frozen.

Maniet's top choice is a raw meat diet. "Cats are true carnivores, and I want them to be on a high-meat, high-protein diet with bones." Her second choice is 80 percent cooked meat and 20 percent cooked vegetables with added supplements. Her last choice is a no-grain, canned food, for clients who prefer canned food or cats that won't eat a raw diet.

If you're going with canned or kibbled cat foods look for minimal processing of high-quality, whole ingredients, preferably organic and human-grade. Ideally, the food will have multiple sources of quality meats, such as chicken liver, turkey, lamb, fish and duck. Natural diets typically don't have any artificial preservatives, colorings, flavorings, sugars or fillers. Grains, if you feed them at all, should be a minor ingredient and whole.

One potential hazard of raw-meat diets for cats and owners is bacteria such as Salmonella and E. coli, particularly if your cat is ill, older or fairly young. Holistic proponents recommend following food-handling, safety recommendations for raw meat and purchasing meat from trusted sources.

For most holistic followers, any possible risk is worth the benefits. "I've done raw food for almost 10 years, and I've never had a cat that got really sick from these," Maniet says. She's also seen many cats benefit from a raw diet. "Everything from the gastrointestinal problems, poor coat and skin, low energy, ear infections and allergies: Once you correct the digestion and the diet, everything else changes for the better."

Lisa Hanks is a freelance writer based in Newport Beach, California. As she writes each day, her three cats rotate lap duties to be sure she is never catless.