

Kitchen Cats: A Guide to Feeding Your Senior Cat

Nutritional changes can help your aging cat if you see signs of obesity, weight loss or dental problems.

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Some say a cat becomes a senior at age 7, which corresponds to a human age of 50. However, cats can be healthy at 15 to 20-plus years of age, indicating they might not be considered seniors until they are 10-12 years old. The age when a cat becomes a senior varies widely, depending on the individual cat and its circumstances.

Veterinarians base dietary recommendations on a cat's physical condition. Nutritional changes help prevent the onset of degenerative diseases that can occur as a cat ages.

Many veterinary nutritionists agree healthy, active older cats in good physical condition do not need to change their adult maintenance diet. Many cats do well on these diets past 10 years of age. If you notice an energy change in the form of weight gain or loss, your cat may need a change in diet. Studies suggest weight gain is more likely in the senior years because older cats are less active and lose lean body mass.

Contrary to some recommendations, reducing protein concentrations of foods for the normal senior cat is not necessary. Optimal intake of high-quality protein helps maintain lean body mass and other important functions in older cats. Protein concentration of at least 30 percent is advised. Protein and fat may improve your cat's appetite. Many commercial cat foods, particularly premium foods, contain acceptable fat and protein concentrations.

The following are some reasons you may need to change your senior cat's diet:

Obesity: Obesity is probably one of the most common nutritional problems we see in senior cats. If your aging cat gains weight, a lower calorie diet may be appropriate. Take your cat for a physical examination to rule out other causes first. While young adult cats require 35 or more calories per pound of body weight per day, a senior cat may do well with 25-30 calories per pound. Senior cat foods tend to have a lower energy density and could be appropriate for an aging, overweight cat.

Weight loss: In the later senior years, weight loss rather than weight gain may occur. The reasons are complex, but should this happen, you might consider an energy-dense food containing higher amounts of readily digestible fat. The fat sources should contain adequate amounts of essential fatty acids. The tastiness of many fats may also improve appetite. A physical examination will rule out diseases such as cancer and hyperthyroidism that might cause weight loss.