

## Understanding Feline Nutrition

**Your cat's diet plays an important role in its overall health. Make sure your cat's food contains the proper nutrients.**

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### Can't Live Without It

Cats are obligate carnivores: they must eat meat to obtain all of the nutrients they need to stay healthy, Dr. Remillard says.

Cats get taurine, vitamin A and an essential fatty acid called arachidonic acid, a vital component of cell membranes, from animal sources, Dr. Carey says. Taurine is an amino acid used to maintain normal bile function and healthy eyes and heart. It is continually lost from the body as the bile acids flow to the gall bladder, then into the small intestines to digest fat and are eventually expelled from the body in feces.

Taurine needs to be constantly replaced, Dr. Remillard says. A kitten raised without it will go blind or develop cardiomyopathy, a fatal heart disease, Dr. Tripp says.

### Choices, Choices, Choices

All quality cat foods should comprise 43 nutrients, Dr. Remillard says. Within these, cats need protein for healthy body tissues; carbohydrates for energy; fats for absorbing and storing vitamins to maintain a healthy coat; vitamins for metabolism; and minerals for healthy skin, hair and development.

Knowing this, you're off to purchase the appropriate food for your cat. However, with the myriad choices available, how do you decide which formula is best? Is your cat a kitten, adult or senior? Should you get premium, grocery store, generic or prescription food? Does your cat require a formulation for hairball care? If you have a purebred kitten, ask your breeder what it's been eating.

If your cat has a special condition, ask your veterinarian about prescription food. Among others, there are formulated foods for urinary tract or kidney problems, excessive hairballs, tartar buildup and food allergies. Also speak to your veterinarian if your cat is experiencing vomiting or diarrhea.

In addition to these specific needs, consider the following questions before purchasing cat food:

1. Should you buy dry, moist or canned food? As carnivores, cats need a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet. Wet food is more nutritionally balanced and a better protein source for cats, and contains fewer preservatives. Dry food, on the other hand, can be left out all day and the crunchiness provides a cleaning benefit for cats' teeth. Most feline nutritionists recommend a wet-food diet for cats; however, dry food can be used to supplement cats' diets.