

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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2. How much can you afford to spend? The less expensive food may not be the most economical, Dr. Carey says. Premium cat foods, which should use higher-quality meat, are more nutrient-dense, so your cat will eat less to gain the calories it needs, he says. The difference in actual cost may only be a penny or two more a day for a premium food.

"Feed them premium food. There's no issue there. Give them good raw materials," says Dr. Tripp, who feeds his three cats a premium brand.

3. How are ingredients listed on the label? Ingredients should be listed by weight, Dr. Remillard says. If chicken or chicken by-product meal is one of the first items listed, the diet is high in protein. If corn is first, it is particularly high in carbohydrates. The food should be relatively low in carbohydrates, Dr. Carey says. Certain types of carbohydrates (e.g., rice) have high glycemic indices, which cause sugar to be absorbed into the cat's system too quickly, he says. Corn is needed to slow down sugar absorption.

When reading food labels, look for a minimum of 28 percent protein for adult cats; 31 to 32 percent is normal. The fat content should be at least 21 percent. There should be six percent minerals, two percent vitamins, about three percent fiber and approximately 36 percent carbohydrates.

Consult with your veterinarian to determine the best food for your cat on the basis of its age, lifestyle and activity level. "Feed to correct body shape, not the bag," Dr. Tripp says.

Once you've decided on a particular brand and formula, check the label to be sure the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) has tested it, Dr. Remillard says. AAFCO develops and directs the regulations and standards for the manufacture, distribution and sale of animal foods, resulting in a safe product for the consumer.

"If the AAFCO statement meets the cat's requirements, then it's a perfectly good, reasonable food to try," she says. "If it's in your price range and you can get it near where you live, give it a try."