

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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The Taste Test If you thought educating yourself about cat foods was tough, now you have to get your cat to eat what you've picked out. If you're introducing a new food to an adult cat, don't switch it all at once. Mix in a small amount of the new food with the old for 10 days, gradually increasing the amount of new food.

Kittens may take more easily to a variety of foods if you start when they're first weaned, Dr. Tripp says. "Kittenhood will influence their view of food. Try a few different forms in kittenhood and broaden their spectrums," he says. The variety it receives will make it less likely to be a finicky adult eater.

The feeding routine is also important. Will you be meal-feeding two or three times a day or leaving dry food out for free-choice feeding? What works for one cat might not work for another. "Cats are more different than they're alike," Dr. Remillard says.

Some cats crave a quiet spot away from the noise of children and other animals, others are perfectly content dining on the floor next to you at the kitchen table. If your cat doesn't seem comfortable, or it's not eating properly, try a different arrangement; putting the food in a place only it can reach is oftentimes a solution.

"A quiet setting is probably important, especially if you have dogs and cats and you want them to eat in peace," Dr. Carey says. You might also want to feed cats with different dietary needs in separate rooms to keep them out of each other's food.

Some cats are fussy about the temperature of their food. Most like it between room and body temperature, Dr. Remillard says. If they like canned food warm, heat it in the microwave for a few seconds, but be sure to stir it afterward to avoid hot spots.

Even the material bowls are made of affects your cat's eating habits. Plastic bowls have a tendency to trap odors, according to The Purina Encyclopedia of Cat Care, by Amy D. Shojai (1998, Ballantine Books, \$24.50). Ceramic bowls made in the United States are probably the best bowls to use, also according to the book. The glaze in foreign-made bowls may contain lead. You might consider heavy glass bowls, which do not move across the floor as the cat eats. Stainless steel bowls are easily cleaned, but the cat might dislike how the food tastes in them. You'll just have to experiment to determine which bowl works best for your cat.