

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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Betsy, a 13-year-old gray tabby, bats a hollow, kibble-filled plastic ball around the room. She pounces on it, rolls around with it, then lies on one side to swat it with her paw. Food morsels spill out as the orb careens across the floor. She snatches up and nibbles a few pieces before darting off behind a chair leg, a safe place from which to study her "prey."

The toy rests where it stopped, beckoning to her. Mesmerized, Betsy springs from her hiding place to resume the chase, which continues until she's had enough to eat. Then, Betsy turns her back on the "kill" and pads off, gracefully lifting a paw to her mouth to begin grooming.

Playing with enticing food-filled toys helps satisfy a domesticated cat's natural hunting instincts, says her owner, Daniel Carey, DVM, director of technical communications in research and development at IAMS Co., Dayton, Ohio. "The cat has to hunt for its food. It fulfills a need and gets them up and around and moving," he says.

Feral cats, on the other hand, spend much of their day prowling for food - usually mice and birds. Once they catch the prey, the cats tend to enjoy playing with it, letting it go briefly, before pouncing again and finally killing the animal, all part of the thrill of the hunt.

"If [our pets] were wild, food and shelter would be the focus of cats' lives. When we feed them out of a bowl, they lose some of that," Dr. Carey says.

"Evolution never left a bowl of food around. The excitement and joy and thrill of the kill are removed when we feed cats from a bowl," agrees Rolan Tripp, DVM, an affiliate professor of Applied Animal Behavior at Colorado State University's Veterinary School. Although most indoor cats lead healthier, longer lives than cats forced to forage for their own meals, many cats also get less exercise than their outdoor brethren, which can lead to weight gain and other health problems as they age. For example, significant weight gain is related to diabetes, says Rebecca Remillard, DVM, Ph.D., a board-certified veterinary nutritionist who practices at Angell Memorial Animal Hospital, Boston.

Your indoor, bowl-fed cat doesn't have to be a sedentary, lazy mass of fur, say veterinary nutritionists. To avoid this, you need to understand your cat's nutritional needs, avoid harmful foods, find the appropriate food, and figure out the ideal manner to serve it.