

## Even Vets Are Changing Their Feeding Advice for Cats Over 7

Kitties 7 and over need to eat differently than younger cats, but it's not what many veterinarians traditionally recommend. And your older cat may need help with detoxification, brain health, and calming at night. How to convert your cat's age into human years (it's different than with dogs).

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- As your cat moves into her senior years and beyond, it's important to continually re-evaluate her diet to insure she remains well-nourished
- Most veterinarians no longer recommend reduced protein diets for older cats, as research shows they actually need more protein as they age, not less
- The quality and digestibility of the protein in your cat's diet is just as important as the quantity
- The best food for most cats, regardless of age, is species appropriate fresh food diet

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Is your cat getting up in years? If so, you're not alone – estimates are that a significant number of cats (40% as of 2012) in the U.S. are over the age of 7.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike with humans and many dog breeds, it's not always easy to tell a kitty's age just by looking at her. And to confuse things a bit more, calculating her age in human years isn't quite as simple as you've probably been led to believe.

Cats mature quickly during their first few years of life, and then things level off. According to Calculator Cat, one accepted method of converting a cat's age to an equivalent human age is to add 15 years for the first year of life, 10 years for the second year of life, and 4 years for every year after that.<sup>2</sup>

That means, for example, that a 4-year-old cat is 33 in human years (15 + 10 + 4 + 4).

It's important to have a good idea of your cat's age for many reasons, one of the most important of which is insure she stays well-nourished as she gets older.

### Why Reduced Protein Diets Were Once Advised for Aging Cats

For many years, veterinarians recommended reduced protein diets for older cats. This is because after a lifetime of eating commercial pet food containing poor quality protein that is difficult to digest, a cat's kidney and liver function is compromised.

As crazy as it sounds, reduced-protein senior cat formulas came into being because of the terrible quality of cat foods on the market.

The chronic stress created by a diet that is hard to digest and assimilate causes premature aging and dysfunction in the organs of digestion and detoxification. This was a recipe for disaster, because as we've learned more recently, aging cats actually need *more* protein than their younger counterparts.

## **Cats at Every Stage of Life Need High-Quality Protein**

In 1992, Dr. Delmar Finco, a veterinary nutritionist, discovered protein requirements actually increase as pets age. Even in animals with kidney failure, restricting protein didn't improve their health or longevity.

In fact, Dr. Finco's research proved cats on low protein diets developed hypoproteinemia. They had muscle wasting, became catabolic, and lost weight. The more that protein was restricted, the more ill these kitties became.

Dr. Finco discovered it was the level of phosphorus in foods, not necessarily the amount of protein that exacerbated kidney disease. Since that research was published, veterinary recommendations have changed.

These days, what we recommend for animals struggling with under-functioning kidneys and livers is a diet containing excellent quality protein that is highly digestible and assimilable. We also recommend restricting phosphorus in the diet, but not necessarily protein.

If your cat is in the later stages of kidney failure, as defined by the International Renal Interest Society (IRIS), a reduced amount of excellent quality protein is suggested, but should still be offered in a kidney-friendly fresh food format.

We know that cats, as carnivores, require lots of high quality protein not only to maintain good organ and immune function, but also to maintain healthy muscle mass as they go through life and the aging process.

## **Protein Quality Is Crucial to the Health of Your Cat**

The quality of the protein you feed your senior cat is of paramount importance. The more digestible and assimilable the protein, and the higher the moisture content of the food, the easier it is for aging organs to process.

Protein quality is extremely variable. There are highly assimilable and digestible proteins (proteins your pet's body can easily absorb and make use of), and there are proteins that are wholly indigestible. For example beaks, feet, hides, tails and snouts are 100% protein, but all 100% is indigestible.

All protein has a biologic value, which is its usable amino acid content. Eggs have the highest biologic value at 100%. Fish is a close second at 92%. Feathers, as you might guess, have zero biologic value. They are all protein, but they are neither digestible nor assimilable.

There are also foods that are high in protein but biologically inappropriate for dogs and cats. Soy is a good example, with a biologic value of 67%. Many popular pet foods contain soy as a protein source, as well as corn.

This is an inexpensive way for pet food manufacturers to increase protein content on the guaranteed analysis printed on the label. But because soy and corn are not species-appropriate, they don't belong in your cat's diet.

Unfortunately, digestion and assimilation are not measured for pet foods, so manufacturers are not penalized for adding other types of protein that have no biologic value for the species of animal eating it.

In addition to corn and soy (as well as other grains) being inflammatory and incomplete proteins for carnivores, there's a myriad of other reasons not to feed a high amount of carbs to cats. Mycotoxins, sugar load (which leads to lifestyle induced diabetes), as well as obesity and arthritis are all solid reasons to avoid offsetting high quality protein with cheap fillers.

## **The Diet I Recommend for Older Cats**

Some foods are metabolically stressful, while others create low metabolic stress on your cat's body. The nutrition that generates the least amount of metabolic stress for most cats, regardless of age, is whole, raw, unprocessed, organic, non-GMO, and in its natural form.

This of course includes animal meat, which should be the foundation of your kitty's diet throughout her life.

Foods that have not been highly processed are the most assimilable for a cat's body. These foods are biologically appropriate. All the moisture in the food remains in the food, whereas foods that have been extruded (most dry food) can have drastically depleted moisture content – as low as 12%.

If you can't feed fresh food (raw or gently cooked), the second best diet is a dehydrated or freeze dried balanced diet that has been reconstituted with an abundance of water. Your cat's kidneys and liver can be further stressed as a result of chronic low-grade dehydration, so all foods served "dry" can pose a problem long term.

Of course, if your cat is overweight, no matter her age, it makes sense to reduce calories and fat in the diet. What does *not* make sense is adding fiber. Many weight management ("low fat") and senior cat food formulas contain loads of fiber, which is biologically inappropriate nutrition.

I recommend serving your cat food in its natural state to provide needed moisture, and to insure the highest level of biologic assimilation and digestion. That means feeding a balanced, antioxidant rich, species-appropriate diet that includes omega-3 essential fats, such as krill oil.

Moisture is an aging cat's best friend, so encourage adequate hydration by offering a variety of water bowls around the house or a drinking fountain, in addition to minimizing (or preferably eliminating) dry food. However, if your kitty is addicted to terrible food, adding a whole body supplement, such as Feline Whole Body Support is a good idea.

## **Beneficial Supplements for Senior Kitties**

- Providing your older cat with a SAME (S-adenosylmethionine) supplement is a safe and effective way to stall or improve mental decline, improve mobility, and assist in liver detoxification. Consult your holistic veterinarian for the right dose size.
- Periodic detoxification with the herbs milk thistle and dandelion can be very beneficial, as can providing super green foods to nibble on (sunflower sprouts or wheat grass/"cat grass"). Chlorophyll, chlorella, or spirulina can also be offered in supplement form to enhance your cat's detoxification processes.

- Medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs) have been shown to be safe for cats and can improve brain energy metabolism and decrease the amyloid protein buildup that results in brain lesions in older pets. Coconut oil is a rich source of MCTs and may also reduce hairballs.

I recommend 1/4 teaspoon for every 10 pounds of body weight twice daily for basic MCT support, if your cat will voluntarily eat it.

- If your senior kitty tends to prowl the house at night and vocalize, consider low dose melatonin, which is not only a sedative with a calming effect, but also an antioxidant. I also use Rhodiola, chamomile, and L-theanine with good results.
- Flower essences can be very beneficial in supporting the mental and emotional changes that accompany the aging process in cats. There are several good lines pre-blended for kitties, for example Spirit Essences, and this treatment option is completely safe for cats struggling with cognitive challenges, or those being treated for substantial disease.

## Sources and References

[WebMD](#)

<sup>1</sup> [PetfoodIndustry.com, April 15, 2012](#)

<sup>2</sup> [CalculatorCat.com](#)

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