

# Five Shortcut Blunders That Can Lead to Disaster for Your Cat

Many cat parents are guilty of these common mistakes, often done as time-savers and to make life easier. And because they appear to work, owners continue to take these shortcuts to the proper care that your pet really needs.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Cats aren't as high-maintenance as most dogs, however, they have distinct dietary needs that must be met so they can enjoy healthy, happy lives
- Many of the mistakes cat guardians make concern what they feed their pets
- Feeding biologically inappropriate food, and too much of it, is a common mistake cat parents make
- Another cat owner blunder is not understanding how to insure kitty is always well-hydrated

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Many people think cats don't need much time, attention or TLC, but this is a myth — not reality.

It's true most kitties aren't as high-maintenance as their canine counterparts, however, your cat does have unique needs that must be met so she can enjoy a happy, healthy life with you.

The following are five diet-related mistakes many cat parents make that you'll definitely want to avoid in the care of your own beloved feline companion.

## Five Cat Owner-Induced Dietary Disasters

1. **Feeding the wrong diet** — Some foods are metabolically stressful, for example, all dry (kibble) formulas, any processed pet food, wet or dry, containing feed-grade (versus human grade) ingredients and foods containing grains, potatoes or other high starch ingredients.

The nutrition that generates the least amount of metabolic stress for most cats, regardless of age, is their ancestral diet: 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 your 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 and denatured proteins.

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 or broth.

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 in the diet. What does not make sense is adding fiber. Many weight management and senior cat food formulas contain loads of fiber, which is biologically inappropriate nutrition.

It's best to serve 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 and species-appropriate diet that includes omega-3 essential fats, such as krill oil.

Many cats are addicted to unhealthy dry foods, so you may need to transition your kitty to a healthier diet.

2. **Offering the ill-advised, all-day and all-kitty-can-eat buffet** — Also known as free feeding or feeding ad libitum, this cat owner mistake by necessity goes hand-in-hand with a poor-quality diet, specifically kibble, because it's the only type of food you can safely leave at room temperature 24/7.

Free feeding is the perfect way to create an overweight or obese kitty, which is absolutely not the goal if you want your cat to live a long and healthy life. In addition, a constantly available food source turns your feline hunter into a grazer, which goes against nature.

Wild cats are always on the move in search of their next meal. Many pet cats, on the other hand, are free fed, and the more you feed Tiger, the less interested he'll be in pursuing his natural drive to hunt.

If your cat is healthy, separate his daily rations into several small portions and place them in different locations around the house for him to find. This obviously only makes sense on days when you'll be at home and can insure he finds all his food before it spoils.

It's also best to put food bowls at the bottom and top of as many flights of stairs as you have to encourage muscle-building exercise throughout the day.

Alternatively, you can feed two portion-controlled meals a day. While many people feed their cats twice a day, feeding just once a day actually offers a number of health benefits, including a lower risk of diabetes.

3. **Over-treating with treats** — Treats are the fastest growing type of pet food, and many over-indulged kitties have the girth to prove it. While dog parents are much more likely to buy treats than cat parents, unfortunately, there's a tendency among many cat owners to seriously overdo it when they offer Mr. Whiskers a snack.

Treats, even the healthiest ones, shouldn't make up more than 15% of your kitty's daily food intake, and ideally less than 10%. It's important to remember that treats aren't a complete form of nutrition for your cat, and should never be fed in place of balanced, species-appropriate meals.

Overfeeding treats on top of daily food intake will result in an obese cat, and overfeeding treats while

underfeeding balanced meals will result in nutritional deficiencies. It's also very important to offer kitty the healthiest snacks available.

A high-quality treat will not contain grains or unnecessary fillers, rendered animal byproducts, added sugar (including molasses and honey), chemicals (e.g., propylene glycol), artificial preservatives or ingredients known to be highly allergenic to pets.

Since these criteria rule out the majority of commercial cat treats on the market, you'll need to look for healthier choices, which are typically manufactured by smaller companies.

If you're already feeding a high-quality commercial pet food you trust, see if the manufacturer also makes treats.

Another option is to offer fresh human foods if your kitty will eat them. Small amounts are the rule — no more than 1/8th inch square of any treat. Surprisingly, some cats will eat cantaloupe and zucchini or nibble cat grass that's offered several times a day.

4. **Family-style dining in multi-cat households** — Cats (wild or domesticated) don't hunt or eat in packs like dogs. Felines are solitary hunters and sharing is foreign to them unless a female is nursing a litter. Many households have more than one cat, and they are often fed as a group. This can lead to stressed-out cats and competitive eating contests in which kitties eat more food and faster than they would if they were dining alone.

Cats in multi-cat households should be fed separately. This gives you the ability to precisely control the amount of food each kitty is served, and lets you know immediately if someone's appetite drops off or picks up noticeably (both can be signs of illness). Dining alone also allows each cat to eat at his or her own pace without any need to compete or resource-guard.

5. **Missing the boat on feline-friendly water sources** — There's a reason your kitty doesn't gulp water from a bowl like dogs do — she has a naturally low thirst drive. In the wild, felines easily meet their hydration needs when they eat small prey animals, which are around 70% water. Nature designs cats to hydrate via their diet.

Dry food, which is unfortunately what many cat parents feed, is only 5% to 10% water. By contrast, a nutritionally balanced, fresh and meat-based diet is around 70% to 80% water, as is canned cat food. Cats fed kibble need much more water than it occurs to them to drink to compensate for a dry diet.

Studies of healthy cats fed wet versus dry food show that cats on diets with high moisture content rarely visit the water bowl, yet they consume double the amount of moisture as the cats eating kibble. The kibble-fed cats did not demonstrate a high enough thirst drive to make up the water deficit at the water bowl.

And as you might suspect, feeding kitty a dry food diet puts significant stress on her kidneys because it is so lacking in moisture.

If you're concerned about your cat's water intake, consider adding water to her food. You can also try adding flavoring to the water (try using the liquid from a can of tuna or cat food) to make it more enticing, or add bone broth. Also, some cats ignore still water but will drink moving water from a pet water fountain.

**Sources and References**

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