Nutritional Needs of Senior Cats

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As cats grow older, their nutritional needs usually change. Proper nutrition can add years to a cat's life and slow down the progression of many diseases. Monitoring your older cat's appetite, food consumption, eating habits, weight, and body condition will be helpful when you and your veterinarian determine your cat's specific nutritional requirements and diet.

Nutrient requirements and ability to digest food

As dogs age, their metabolism changes and their need for calories decreases. The same is NOT true for cats. Their energy needs stay basically the same throughout adulthood. Obesity is one of the main health problems of middle age (6-8 years of age) cats; it occurs less often by the age of ten, and greatly decreases after that.

Some studies have shown that senior cats do not digest, and thus absorb fat, as well as younger cats. This means that older cats may need to consume fat that is more digestible to get the same amount of energy. You'll need to monitor the weight and body condition of your cat, and adjust his diet accordingly.

The protein needs of cats are higher than the protein needs of many other animals. Inadequate amounts of protein in the diet can impair immune function. Unless the cat has a health condition which would call for protein restriction, an older cat should not be placed on a protein restricted diet.

Supplements

The level of various vitamins, minerals, and electrolytes may be decreased in older animals who either absorb less of them through the intestinal tract, or lose more of them through the kidneys and urinary tract. Some older animals eat less, such as those with oral disease, and may not receive their daily needs of vitamins and minerals. Some evidence in other species suggest that antioxidants such as vitamins A (beta-carotene), E, and C may play a role in protecting against some normal aging processes. Consult with your veterinarian to determine which supplements may be beneficial for your cat.

Special dietary needs of older cats

Various disease processes may require dietary changes to lessen the effects or progression of the disease. Cats with diabetes mellitus, colitis, constipation, or anal gland disease often benefit from diets with increased dietary fiber. Cats with inflammatory bowel disease and colitis can benefit from diets which have highly digestible sources of protein, fat, and carbohydrates. There are special diets available for cats with heart disease; these diets generally have decreased amounts of sodium and increased amounts of the amino acid taurine. Cats with chronic kidney failure should be on diets with highly digestible protein so there are fewer breakdown products, which the kidneys are responsible for eliminating in the urine. Cats with dental and oral disease which causes pain on eating hard food, may need to be placed on canned food. Cats with cancer have special dietary needs; increasing Omega-3 fatty acids may be recommended.

Water

Older cats may not drink sufficient amounts of water, which can exacerbate constipation problems and contribute to dehydration in cats with kidney disease. Getting a cat to drink more water may not be easy. Offering more sources of water and adding flavoring to the water may entice some cats to drink more.

Increasing food intake

For a variety of reasons, including certain disease processes, some already finicky cats become even more so as they age. As soon as you find a food they seem to like and buy six more cans of it, they suddenly decide they do not like it any more. You will soon find yourself with a cupboard full of cat food that you eventually decide to donate to the local animal shelter. To encourage a cat to eat more, you can:

- Heat canned or moistened dry food in the microwave to a warm temperature. This will increase the aroma of the food. Be sure to stir the food before feeding it to the cat, since microwaves do not always heat uniformly.
- Add water from canned tuna, again, to increase the aroma of the food. Ask your veterinarian if your cat can have small amounts of clam juice, chicken drippings, or baby food added to her normal diet. (Note: the baby food should not contain onion.)
- If on dry food, switch to canned food. You may also want to switch to special diets, which are high-calorie, nutrient dense, and are made for 'stressed' animals. Hill's a/d, which is available through your veterinarian is an example of this type of diet.
- Feed smaller amounts of food more often. Just as you may suddenly lose your appetite when an overflowing plate

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of food you could not possibly eat in its entirety is placed in front of you, the same may be true of your cat. By offering only a small amount of food multiple times during the day, your cat may actually increase her total daily intake.

- Ensure your cat has a quiet, stress-free place to eat. Be sure younger cats or other pets in the household are not harassing the older cat when she eats.
- If it will not disturb her, pet her and talk softly to her as she eats.
- Feed balanced home made diets made with recipes provided by a veterinarian.
- Consult with your veterinarian regarding use of appetite stimulants for short-term use.

Summary

Cats, as a species, have specific nutritional needs, such as their need for high amounts of protein, the amino acid taurine, and Vitamin A. As cats age, their individual nutritional requirements can vary depending on their age-related changes in body function, disease processes, and behavior. Work with your veterinarian to determine the best diet and feeding approaches for your older cat.

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