CHANGING IT UP: INTRODUCING YOUR CAT TO NEW FOOD

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Do you have a kitten that is ready to move to adult food? Or an adult cat that is entering a new life-stage? Perhaps you have adopted a new cat and are introducing her to new food. Has your cat simply stopped eating her current food and seems to want a change? Or has your vet recommended a change of diet because of health reasons? Whatever the reason, sometimes you will need to change your cat's diet.

Transitioning your cat to a new food can be a challenge at times, but there a few simple strategies you can implement that will help her get used to her new diet.

Firstly though, let's look at the right food for your cat's life-stage, and then we'll look at ways to transition her to a new food.

THE RIGHT NUTRITION FOR YOUR CAT

Your cat is a strict carnivore with needs and nutritional requirements that are uniquely hers.

But wherever your cat is in her life, she needs a complete and balanced diet that provides all the energy, proteins, minerals and vitamins to ensure her health, well-being and longevity.

Kittens (cats less than a year old) are in the high-growth stage of their life and need more calories and essential nutrients than adult cats. They also have a sensitive digestive system and a developing immune system. For these reasons, if you have a kitten, it's important that you choose a food specifically formulated for this period of her life.

Adult cats (cats over a year old), that are not pregnant or lactating are said to be in a 'nutritional maintenance' stage. If your cat is in this stage, her diet should consist of high-quality food that has the nutritional balance to maintain her physical and mental activity. Besides, cats' lifestyle has evolved, close to that of men: more urbanized, more sedentary. Today, almost half of all adult cats live indoors. Therefore, if cats' initial needs have not changed, their diet must adjust to their new lifestyle.

Neutered cats can tend to be less active and more interested in food, which can make it harder to maintain an ideal body weight, especially in the 18-week period following neutering. During this period a cat's weight will change - sometimes without you noticing. It's important to be extra vigilant from the moment your cat comes home from the neutering procedure - weigh and physically inspect her frequently to make sure her normal weight is being maintained. If you want to be doubly sure, the WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition(open in new tab) has developed an easy size and weight evaluation(open in new tab) you can do at home. And remember, food specifically designed for neutered cats will help with weight maintenance.

Pregnant, lactating, weaning and senior cats (cats over 7 years), and aging cats (over 14 years), all have specific dietary requirements too.

Studies suggest that senior cats have lower energy requirements than younger cats, so they generally won't need as many calories in their diet. Therefore, it is very important to monitor your senior cat body weight, because she will tend to decrease her daily activity and it is a common practice to continue giving them the same amount of food, which can lead to weight gain, and potentially related diabetes. On the contrary, aging cats are often less able to digest and to absorb proteins and fats - and to therefore maintain their healthy body weight - so their diet needs to take this into consideration.

As always, it's best to consult with your vet. They will be able to recommend the correct diet based on your cat's life-stage, while taking into consideration other important lifestyle factors such as her level of activity.

Whatever you choose to feed your cat, it's important to follow the manufacturer's recommendations; their instructions will help you determine the right quantity of food for your cat's needs.

And finally - taste is important! Your cat should love what you feed her. Uneaten food obviously has no nutritional value.

WHEN TO TRANSITION A KITTEN TO ADULT FOOD

Kittens have small stomachs and like to nibble their food, often eating up to 18 times a day. But as they grow - generally reaching 75% of their adult size and body weight by the time they are 6 months old - their portion size will reduce.

By the time they are 12 months old they are generally considered to be adult cats. This is the time to transition your kitten to adult food.

TIME TO CHANGE

Whether you have a kitten, a newly adopted cat, or an adult cat entering a new stage in her life, there are a number of ways you can help make the transition to a new food as smooth and easy as possible.

Firstly, take it slow. Even if your cat seems to need a change, or takes to new food easily, it's important to give her digestive system time to adapt to a new food.

Introduce small amounts of the new food as part of her regular food over a period of approximately five to seven days.

Start by replacing 20% of your cat's regular food with the new food, and mix them together. Gradually increase the ratio of new food to regular food until you are feeding your cat 100% of the new food.

Always ensure your cat has access to clean drinking water and monitor her appetite, faeces quality and weight while she is going through the transition. These factors are good indicators of her interest in the new food, and her general health.

If you are transitioning a kitten to adult food, keep in mind kittens often enjoy the 'novelty' of food - they love discovering new smells, flavours (chicken, lamb, beef, fish) and textures (sauces, mousses, jellies, soft kibble, stuffed kibble or the harder kind). Maintaining a positive and fun environment for your kitten as she has these new discoveries will help her to adapt to the new food. It may also help her cope with new experiences and other new foods as she gets older.

WHAT IF MY CAT IGNORES THE NEW FOOD?

Your cat is unique and she has her own preferences, which depend greatly on the food and the way she was fed as a kitten. Over time, some cats develop an attraction for different flavours, a pronounced interest in variety, and the refusal of some types of food. Your cat might become more selective, even difficult, as she gets older.

For your cat's enjoyment and well-being, you might have to try several different foods before identifying the one she really likes. It can all simply depend on the smell of the food and your cat's taste buds! She may need to taste a few different types of food before she finds something she likes, especially if her new food is less appetizing or if her sense of smell has reduced because of health issues or age.

Your cat may also find the new food difficult to chew or ingest, which can in fact be a sign of aging and specifically a dental issue. It's not always easy to identify in the early stages,

but it can certainly have an affect on your cat's eating behaviour. You might see it as a loss of appetite, or that your cat is becoming a fussy eater. Consult your vet if you think your cat may be suffering from dental issues, they can x-ray your cat's gums to check on potential problems, and they will be able to advise you of the right course of action.

If your cat is struggling to move to a new food there are a few extra strategies you can implement to help her transition:

- Completely mix her old food with the new food so she can't pick out the one she prefers. Adding a small amount of warm water will help you combine the two.
- Gently warmed food will give off more aromas than cold food and will probably be more attractive to your cat (room temperature and slightly above is fine, just never heat above 42°C).
- If your cat likes fish, you might want to add a small amount of tuna oil for added aroma and taste, but check with your vet to make sure it fits in with any prescribed diet.

Most important - never let your cat starve, this can have serious health implications for her. If she is completely avoiding the new food it is better to go back to the old food and try again later, following the above tips.

That said, there are a small percentage of cats that are deemed to be "neophobic", meaning they fear any change or anything new, including food items (Bradshaw et al. 20001). Normally, when presented with a novel food, your cat will eat a small amount on the first occasion before gradually increasing her intake (Bradshaw 19862). Alternatively, your cat may completely reject the new food, particularly if it is very unusual (O'Malley 19953). Thus, if you suspect your cat might be neophobic, speak with your vet about other strategies that may help her adapt.

CHANGE CAN BE GOOD!

Sometimes things need to change.

Wherever your cat is in her life, be patient through any transitions and be willing to adapt if she isn't immediately taking to her new food.

Feel free to experiment - try different flavours and formats, like wet food, dry or semi-moist. And be positive about the change - choose appropriate food for your cat and know that you are exposing her to a new experience, while taking care of one of her most important physiological needs. With some positive reinforcement and patience, she should adapt, and feeding time will continue to be a highlight of her day

iBradshaw JW, Healey LM, Thorne CJ, Macdonald DW, Arden-Clark C. Differences in food preferences between individuals and populations of domestic cats Felis silvestris catus. Appl Anim Behav Sci. 2000 Jun 1;68(3):257-268.
iiBradshaw JWS. Mere exposure reduces cats' neophobia to unfamiliar food. Anim Behav. 1986;34(2):613-614.
iiiO'Malley S. The role of variety in the diet. WALTHAM Focus. 1995;5(3):18-22.

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