

Cat Adoption Team | Why Do Some Cats Need Special Diets?

As humans, we count calories and carbs. We strive to take in five to nine servings of vegetables and fruits each day, while avoiding too much sugar and salt. Why? Of course we want to look good in our new jeans; yet a more pressing reason is the desire to be fit, healthy, and pain free.

While most of us spend considerable time planning meals and snacks for ourselves and our families, when it comes to our cats, we just want to open a bag or can and have the food meet all our pet's nutritional needs. The good news is that any of a wide variety of good quality cat foods will keep most of our furry friends happy and healthy. For about 10 percent of cats overall and 5 percent of cats at Cat Adoption Team, getting the right formula of cat food is critical to maintaining optimal health, comfort, and quality of life.

When an adopter comes to CAT, they may see a notation that some cats require special diets. This is not unlike the special diets humans consume if they have diabetes, kidney disease, or allergies. Indeed, cats suffer from ailments similar to human ailments, and as with humans, diet can play an important role in improving health and limiting the progression of disease.

I became interested in special diets for cats when one of our adopted cats failed to thrive.

Meet Taco! We adopted two-year old Taco from CAT. We were immediately drawn to her cute, raccoon face and her playful ways. We have always been a multiple cat household, and Taco was our second adoption from CAT. Imagine our worry taking Taco to the veterinarian for the fifth time in the first four months. She seemed to alternate between bouts of vomiting and diarrhea. Our veterinarian tried withholding food and drink, administering fluids, blood and urine tests, and antibiotics...all with limited results. On the last visit he offered two alternatives: a biopsy of Taco's stomach or assume she was intolerant of something in her diet and try a special hypoallergenic diet. There seemed nothing to lose in trying the new foods. We went home with canned duck and a bag of special food. In the two years since that visit, Taco has been back only for routine care.

Later we were adopted by six-year old Tipper. Diagnosed last spring with urinary tract disease, he is now on a special diet to treat his condition. On this diet, he has lost a little weight, become healthy and strong, and regained his kittenish love of nipping at human toes.

Cost? Yes, special diets are more expensive than grocery store brands and only slightly more expensive than quality brands. Because these diets are very nutrient rich, I feed less of the special diets while providing my cats with all the food they want.

Seeing how well my cats responded to their new diets made me want to know more about all those special cat foods with the initials after their names. I am not a veterinarian. Much of my information has come from attending lectures, visiting the Internet, and reading in various journals. You will, of course, want to consult your own veterinarian if you think your pet may need a special food program.

Some of the conditions treated by diet or by diet in combination with medication include urinary tract disorders, kidney disease, heart disease, arthritis and joint disease, stomach and bowel disorders, diabetes,

allergies and food intolerances, and obesity.

Let's look at food allergies and intolerances. Food allergies account for about 10 percent of all allergies seen in dogs and cats. It is the third most common allergy after flea bite allergies and inhalant allergies. The entire process of a pet being sensitized to a particular agent in food and the complicated antibody response that occurs in the intestinal tract of cats with food allergies is not well understood. What is known is that true food allergies cause symptoms similar to other cat allergies; namely itchy skin, hair loss, and excessive scratching. Food intolerances, however, can result in diarrhea or vomiting and do not create a typical allergic response. Food intolerance in cats is similar to the upset stomach people may experience after eating too much spicy or fried food. Fortunately, both food intolerances and food allergies can be eliminated when the offending agents are removed from a cat's diet. Food allergies and intolerances occur in cats, regardless of breed, sex, or age. The most common ages for food difficulties to occur are between 2 and 6 years old.

Diabetes is quite common in cats. Diabetes is complicated in that many organs are affected by the disease. The good news: many diabetic cats can be managed successfully with special diets alone, no insulin needed. Other diabetic cats need insulin therapy but diet therapy keeps the cat in equilibrium and prevents disease complications. With diabetic cats it is important to time your pet's meals in relation to the administration of insulin. Your veterinarian can help you best meet your cat's needs.

Timely detection and proactive management are your best tools in dealing with **feline heart disease**. By providing your cat with the nutrients shown to be beneficial in helping support heart muscle function, you are helping to slow the progression of the disease. Among the nutrients needed in a diet to treat heart disease are: arginine, taurine, potassium, magnesium, and Omega 3 fatty acids. Protein sources need to be high quality and at levels that will prevent muscle wasting. Veterinarians have both special foods and supplements to treat heart disease.

Urinary tract and kidney diseases can be managed successfully with appropriate special foods. Several different formulas are available. Some diets should be fed exclusively for the life of the cat, while others are administered for a limited period only. Again, your veterinarian's advice is critical. Cats on special diets for urinary tract or kidney diseases must have a constant, plentiful source of fresh water, as increased fluids are necessary in the treatment. The special diets will encourage your cat to drink more.

Lastly, several common conditions not related to disease are often treated with the use of special diets.

Overweight cats can thrive with reduced caloric intake by switching to special diets high in fiber. A good weight reduction formula will include enough fats to help prevent flaky skin associated with low fat diets and will be rich in vitamins and minerals. It will also contain adequate amounts of lean protein to maintain muscle mass during weight loss. **Senior cats and those recovering from surgery** can sometimes benefit from special foods that provide maximum calories in a highly palatable mix.

So what does all this mean to you as a cat owner or potential CAT adopter? If you have been hesitant to adopt one of the cats requiring a "special diet," you may want to reconsider. Several large pet food producers produce top quality special diets to make life easier for cats and their owners. Your veterinarian will help you find the brand of food that is palatable to your pet while meeting specific nutritional needs. Special diet cat foods should never be fed without the express direction of your veterinarian. Some foods can be fed only for a limited period of time, while others need to be fed for the life of the cat. Cats needing special diets should be under the regular care of a knowledgeable veterinarian.

The "code" of special diets: This is a partial list and varies by manufacturer. Look for these letters below the manufacturer's name. Most are available only from veterinarians.

A/D Maximum calorie, for seniors and cats in recovery

C/V Cardio vascular diet

K/D Renal or kidney disease

UR or S/O Urinary tract disease

I/D Intestinal diseases

DM or DCO Diabetes treatment

d/d, ha, or z/d For treatment of food allergies or intolerances

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