

HOW TO FEED A CAT: ADDRESSING BEHAVIORAL NEEDS



What we feed our cats is very important, but so is how we feed them. How we feed our cats can affect them physically and emotionally.

All cats are carnivores (meat eaters), so they have a strong hunting instinct. They also prefer to eat alone and multiple small meals a day.

Satisfying the need to hunt and eat small meals alone, will make your cat happier and healthier, and avoid over or underfeeding. This may include using puzzle or automatic feeders, and in multiple cat homes arranging the food and water to reduce stress between your cats.

CURRENT FEEDING METHODS

Your cat's environment, including feeding routine, positively or negatively impacts quality of life. Most pet cats rely on humans for food. Cats are frequently fed in one location with relatively large volumes of food once or twice a day. Many cats always have food available.

In homes with multiple cats, some cats may not get along with others. Even though cats will eat together, group feeding can cause gorging, feeding aggression, and even weight issues.

Cats are very good at hiding signs of distress, so even though they may not show you clear signs of anxiety or fighting when eating together, underlying anxiety and stress affects their wellbeing.

OBESITY-RELATED PROBLEMS

- Feeding one or two large meals does not meet a cat's need to eat many small meals. This approach to feeding can lead to inactivity, stress, overeating and obesity.
- If a cat is bored, eating can become an activity, leading to obesity. Overweight cats have more difficulty performing physical activities such as jumping, hunting, climbing, and playing. Obesity can also lead to health problems such as diabetes, arthritis, high blood pressure and heart and respiratory disease.

STRESS-RELATED PROBLEMS

- Stress can lead to medical issues such as cystitis (bladder inflammation) and can contribute to litter box issues.
- A cat may eat too quickly in order to return to their safe space if they are trying to avoid a stressful encounter with another pet or household member such as an active toddler.
- If a cat is not able to access food regularly, because of the possibility of a stressful encounter with another pet or child, they may eat too little or overeat.



DEVELOPING FEEDING SOLUTIONS FOR YOUR CAT

When creating feeding plan, mimic the cats natural feeding behavior. This reduces begging for food, feline frustration, and inter-cat conflict.

Puzzle Feeders and Hunting

Puzzle feeders (food puzzles) are objects that hold food and must be handled by the cat to get the food out. Using puzzle feeders and even hiding kibble around the home increases activity and provides mental and physical stimulation. There are many types of puzzle feeders you can buy, or easily make at home. Puzzle feeders vary in their complexity, can be motionless or rolling, and can be designed for dry or wet foods. Always start with simple puzzle feeders first because your cat needs to learn how to use them.

As your cat gets comfortable with using them, you can slowly make them more difficult. Encourage your cat to hunt and forage for food by placing kibbles and treats in different locations. Be patient and slowly incorporate new feeding methods.

Frequent Meals and Appropriate Nutrition

Divide your cat's daily food allowance into multiple small meals fed throughout the 24-hr period. Use puzzle feeders, when possible, automatic feeders can also be helpful although they do not provide for hunting and foraging.

Make sure your cat is actually eating an appropriate amount, especially if you have more than one cat. Contact your vet to discuss how many calories your cat should eat. The food should be where the cat can reach.

Separate Resources for Homes with Multiple Cats

Remember, just because cats will eat together, does not mean they should. Forcing a cat to eat in proximity to another cat that they otherwise try to avoid often creates anxiety, stress, and health problems.

In multiple pet households, offer separate feeding stations with distance and visual separation between cats, as well as utilize elevated space, to reduce stress and associated health issues.

First, determine the household group dynamics to best locate food and water stations (as well as litter boxes). Ask yourself these questions: which cats spend time together? Which cats avoid each other? Where does each cat spend their time? Place food, water, and litter boxes accordingly.

Next, watch for signs of anxiety or tension during feeding time. Cats need to feel safe when eating. When cats are anxious or tense, you may see vigilant behavior including constant looking around, approaching the food with caution, ear flattening or positioned sideways in .. "airplane" position, or hunched or crouched posture. Make sure each cat has their own food and water bowl. These should be in separate locations for each cat. Some cats that are able to jump may prefer to eat on elevated surfaces. It may be helpful to put the water and food bowl where the cat spends most of its time. but not close to the litter box. Make sure that one cat does not 'guard' or 'commander' the food. Place food with visual separation so cats cannot see one another. Meals can be offered through programmable feeding bowls; some utilize individual microchips, only allowing one cat to access the bowl.