

Nutrition for the mature cat

Feeding goals for our mature cat are to minimise age-related diseases, maximise quality of life and maximise longevity. Mature pet foods help maintain body condition, weight and good hydration.

Feline age-related diseases become more prevalent around seven or eight years of age in cats. Behavioural, physical and metabolic changes also start to occur at this age. Our pets become less active and have a reduction in lean body mass (muscle). These changes together will result in a reduction in your pet's metabolic rate.

Optimising nutrition and preventative care in mature cats is important to help reduce the risk factors for the common age-related diseases, or to better manage them. Older cats will age at different rates, which means that individual's needs must be considered when looking at our pet's nutritional requirements.

What should we look for in a diet when feeding a healthy mature cat?

1) Water

Cats are desert animals and generally do not drink a lot of water. Ageing impairs thirst sensitivity and many diseases of the mature cat will affect their kidneys, resulting in our pets becoming dehydrated. Access to fresh water at all times is therefore essential. Changing to a wet food or adding water to your pet's food can increase their water intake. If your cat likes fish flavours one tip is to add some of the water from cans of tuna in spring water to your pet's drinking water (you can also freeze them in ice cube trays to store). Also, using ceramic water bowls, rain water or a cat fountain can help encourage a cat to drink. Cats do not like to drink close to where they eat so having multiple water bowls in other areas can also help.

2) Fat

Obesity affects a large number of mature cats. Diseases that can be caused by obesity in cats include diabetes mellitus, heart disease and high blood pressure. Through their early mature years a moderate to low fat diet will help reduce the risk of obesity. As our pets progress into their latter mature years their fat requirements may increase and they require an energy dense food with high levels of essential fatty acids. These essential fatty acids help maintain normal skin and coat condition.

Fats should be highly digestible in food intended for older cats as they have difficulty digesting them due to changes within the body (decline in pancreatic enzyme secretion). A moderate fat content for older mature cats enhances absorption of fat soluble vitamins.

3) Fibre

This aids gastrointestinal health, promotes normal gut motility and reduces constipation. Due to reduced water intake constipation is common in older cats. Water that is in the faeces will be absorbed back into the body while it is in the large intestine, to help preserve water balance. This can cause hard faeces which can sit in the intestine slowing gut movement and causing constipation. Fibre also reduces digestibility and dilutes calorie content in food. Therefore obesity prone or inactive cats benefit from a higher fibre diet, while mature older cats that are normal or underweight require less fibre.

4) Protein

Protein should not be restricted in a healthy cat. Adequate protein and energy intake is needed to sustain lean body mass (muscle). Moderate protein intake for mature cats will also help with palatability which in turn will help with food intake and weight maintenance. As our pets get older certain diseases result in reduction in protein requirements. Healthy older cats should receive adequate protein to help maintain their protein needs and prevent protein malnutrition.

In mature diets the level of protein is slightly lower but the quality is greater, due to the higher biological value of the specific protein source. This will aid digestion and absorption of protein. Higher quality proteins have components that the body can easily digest and use for its maintenance. Lower quality proteins are not as easily digestible so more is required for the correct amount thus increasing the protein levels in the food.

5) Calcium and Phosphorus

After growth the requirement for calcium and phosphorus declines to that needed by an adult cat and remains relatively constant for life. After seven years of age the bone mass of the mature cat declines so a moderate level of calcium and phosphorus is required to help maintain it. Reduced phosphorus is recommended in older cats to help slow the progression of kidney disease by decreasing the kidney workload and phosphorus retention. Cats with kidney disease will have reduced levels in their diet compared with those found in commercial diets.

6) Sodium and chloride

Nutritional requirements should be met but excesses should be avoided due to age related cardiac disease.

7) Potassium

Healthy cats will not need a supplement of potassium but older cats with kidney disease may need to have a potassium supplement. Low potassium can cause lethargy, reduced appetite and muscle cramps.

8) Antioxidants

The body defends itself from free radicals (toxins that are generated by cell metabolism) by utilising antioxidants. Vitamin E & C will be added to the diet - Vitamin C helps to regenerate Vitamin E when it has come into contact with a free radical. Selenium keeps the brain function optimal and so helps reduce the role of brain ageing (dementia).