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Feeding Guidelines for New Kittens

Affected Animals: Kittens.

Description: Kittens weigh about 100 grams at birth and gain between 50 and 100 grams each week until they reach five to six months of age. Weaning kittens from their mother's milk before six weeks of age may slow their growth and result in overly cautious or aggressive behavior when they reach adulthood. Usually, the mother cat will wean the kittens when they are between seven and 10 weeks of age. During the weaning, they should be fed a dry commercial cat food that is specifically formulated for growing kittens.

Cat and kitten foods are available in canned, dry, or semi-moist forms. Most veterinarians recommend feeding a dry kitten product because this type of food is less expensive than canned or semi-moist foods, and the crunchy kibble helps to minimize tartar build-up. Canned and semi-moist products, however, are more palatable than dry food and can be provided as periodic treats. Once the container has been opened, both canned and soft-moist products must be covered and stored in the refrigerator.

Cat foods made specifically for kittens should be nutritious and should support growth; look for the words "complete and balanced" on the label. Complete and balanced products contain all the necessary nutrients, in the appropriate amounts, for young, growing cats. Although not required by law, most name-brand commercial manufacturers test their growth products by feeding them to mother cats and kittens. Owners should check the label for the Association of American Feed Control Officials' claim confirming that the product has been tested in animal feeding trials.

Because cats are natural nibblers, averaging 12 to 20 small meals every 24 hours, they should have access to food at all times. In addition, clean, fresh water should always be available. In considering where to feed the kitten, owners should take into consideration how they plan to manage training and housebreaking, and whether there are additional pets or children in the household. Some common feeding places include a quiet corner of the basement, the kitchen, a bathroom, the garage, a bedroom, or even beside the owner's chair in the living room.

Young cats that have reached the age of six to nine months and have been spayed or neutered may experience a slight decrease in caloric needs and an increase in body

weight. In response, the owner should switch gradually from free-choice feeding to portion-controlled meals. The avoidance of excess body weight is important in preventing obesity, which can lead to health problems as the cat gets older.

Feeding instructions listed on pet food packages are reasonable recommendations to follow for about two weeks after the new kitten's introduction to the household; after that, an adjustment should be made based upon the animal's body condition. A kitten in good body condition should have an hourglass shape when viewed from above, or from the aerial view, while a kitten that is overweight will have lost definition around the midsection. The ribs should be able to be felt but not seen; if the ribcage is visible, the kitten may be too thin and the owner should consider increasing the total calories offered. However, if the individual ribs cannot be distinguished because too much fat is covering the ribcage, the owner should consider reducing the caloric intake.

Most cat owners want to feed treats or snacks of some kind, and there are several commercial cat treats available in grocery stores, pet specialty shops, or available on the internet. The use of treats as rewards during training is appropriate, but the portions should be small because most treats, snacks and human scraps fed to cats are a source of extra calories. To avoid problems such as obesity and diarrhea, treats and snacks should not make up more than 10 percent of the kitten's total caloric intake, and this guideline applies to adult cats as well.

For several reasons, dog food products and vegetarian diets are inappropriate to feed to cats and kittens. The daily protein requirement is higher for cats than dogs because liver enzymes of cats are constantly running at a higher activity level, and this results in the need for a fixed amount of dietary protein to be used for energy. Cats have an essential requirement for the beta-amino acid taurine, which is needed for normal function of several organs including the eye and the heart. Only animal-source proteins provide taurine and arginine, another important amino acid for cats, in the diet. Cats also require animal-source fats to provide the essential fatty acid called arachidonic acid, whereas dogs can convert dietary sources of linoleic acid to arachidonic acid and thus do not need animal fats in their foods. And unlike dogs, cats cannot convert the amino acid tryptophan into the B-vitamin niacin, or beta-carotene into vitamin A, so these critical nutrients must be provided in the cat and kitten food.