

Nutrition, Weight Management, and Specific Diets

Your pet's nutrition plays a critical role in his/her overall health, performance, and longevity. Healthy pets that are not eating an appropriate amount of food or those that are not eating a balanced diet may suffer significant health consequences. Further, pets in certain stages of life, those with certain breed characteristics, or pets with specific diseases may be critically impacted by dietary choices.

Maintaining an Ideal Body Weight:

Maintaining an ideal body weight or body condition is imperative to the health of your pet. Obesity is associated with a pro-inflammatory state, increases the risk of systemic diseases (endocrine diseases, infections, and high blood pressure, for example), and places undue stress on different body systems including the joints, airway, and heart.

Conversely, emaciation or starvation is also associated with significant health complications including weakness, metabolic dysfunction, and organ dysfunction. Veterinarians will often assign a body condition score to your pet in order to objectively track his/her weight and to guide weight management goals. Your primary care veterinarian can evaluate your pet's current body condition, recommend any changes or goals if indicated, and teach you to monitor your pet's body condition at home.

In patients for whom weight loss is advised, exercise in moderation can also be helpful. It's very important to avoid over-exertion or injury early in the process of weight loss, as obese patients may have limited mobility, chronic pain, or joint disease or discomfort. A consultation with a veterinary rehabilitation specialist can be very helpful in these cases, to help design a mobility and exercise plan in conjunction with your pet's diet modifications.

How Much Should My Pet Eat?

The amount of food your pet needs per day depends on several factors. As mentioned above, your primary care veterinarian will help you to evaluate your pet's body condition, taking into account his/her age, life-stage, activity level, and any concurrent health issues. We typically start by calculating your pet's resting energy

requirement, which represents the number of calories your pet needs per day to maintain his/her body weight while resting quietly. This number is multiplied by a specific factor based on your pet's current life-stage and activity level. Once your veterinarian has arrived at a daily calorie target for your pet, they can use the calorie content of your pet's food to calculate how much food your pet needs to eat.

Importantly, once you and your veterinarian determine how many calories your pet needs to achieve or maintain an ideal body weight, your pet's normal diet PLUS treats or any additional food must be counted towards that number. For example, if your pet needs 2 cups of his normal food per day to maintain his ideal body weight, giving him 2 cups of food per day PLUS several high-calorie treats may result in weight gain.

There are numerous veterinary nutrition resources online to help guide you through similar calculations.

Specific Diets:

Our pets have a host of nutrient requirements that are best met by diets that have been balanced by veterinary nutritionists. If specific vital nutrients are not provided in the diet, dogs and cats can develop significant or even life-threatening complications.

If you have any questions about your pet's diet or you want to pursue a homemade diet, we recommend a consultation with a veterinary nutritionist. Veterinary nutritionists are able to formulate homemade diets that account for specific disease processes- including food allergies or food intolerances- and meet your pet's nutrient requirements.

Hypoallergenic:

Some pets have food allergies, which may manifest as allergic dermatitis (itchy skin or ears) or chronic GI upset. Common culprits in the diet include beef, dairy, chicken, and wheat. These pets may benefit from a hypoallergenic or novel protein diet.

Importantly, these diets should be formulated by a veterinary nutritionist to ensure they are balanced and thus providing your pet with all the nutrients he/she needs. Pets with food allergies should not be given table scraps or treats that could contain allergens, as this could result in an acute exacerbation of their allergies.

Raw Diets:

Raw diets remain highly controversial. There are documented risks and benefits of feeding a raw diet. While raw meat may be more digestible than cooked meat, risks of a raw diet

include the lack of important nutrients (nutritionally imbalanced) and risk for bacterial or parasitic disease. Pets that eat a raw diet could become sick from a bacterial or parasitic infection themselves or could transmit a bacterial or parasitic infection to people. Similarly, anyone that handles the raw diet could be exposed to bacteria and parasites. You should discuss a raw diet with your primary care veterinarian prior to initiating it.

Limited Ingredient (“Grain-Free”) Diets:

Similar to raw diets, there is controversy surrounding limited ingredient, high-legume, or “grain-free” diets since some of those diets have been associated with dilated cardiomyopathy, a severe and life-threatening form of heart disease. It’s unclear why some of these diets result in significant weakening of the heart muscle, but at this time veterinary cardiologists are advising against the use of a limited ingredient, high legume, or grain-free diet if your pet doesn’t require one. If your pet needs a limited ingredient diet, cardiologists advise a consultation with a veterinary nutritionist to ensure the diet is well-balanced.

