

The Challenges of Feeding a Senior Cat

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So, your cat Fluffy is nine years old, loves his current feeding regimen, has a shiny coat, passed his last vet exam with flying colors and is still as playful as a kitten. But it seems to you that every time you stop in at your local pet supply store, you're confronted with a new food that he supposedly needs.

Every major pet food manufacturer has one or more lines of food products targeted at "Senior" or "Mature" cats and more and more boutique brands are following suit. You're starting to wonder, "Should I be feeding a senior formula? Why would I change?" and, "Maybe I should start the change now to avoid problems later?" And then you ask yourself, "Is this a boat I really want to rock?"

What is a Senior Cat?

The first thing you and your vet need to address before deciding to change Fluffy's diet is whether Fluffy is truly a senior cat. The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) Task Force on Senior Care defines a senior cat in their 2021 Feline Senior Care Guidelines as one over 10 years of age. However, they also note that some cats can appropriately be considered a "senior" as early as eight years of age, possibly earlier, depending on the cat's breed or genetic predisposition.⁷ Some veterinarians will classify older cats as "geriatric" or "frail," but the AAFP Task Force believes these terms are statements of their health status and are not specifically associated with age.

The determination becomes even more complex if you have a pedigreed cat. What is the typical life span for your breed? Some breeds typically have life spans in the early teens, others live as long as 20+ years. Generally speaking, a cat with a genetic predisposition for a longer life is going to age more slowly and its nutritional needs will also change more slowly. You and your vet should take this into consideration before determining Fluffy's senior cat status—or lack thereof.

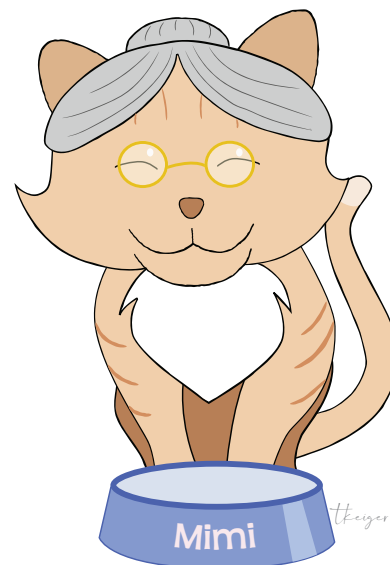
How Nutritional Requirements Change as Cats Age

You've now decided that Fluffy's breed has an average lifespan of about 15 years, so at age nine, Fluffy is likely entering into his senior years. What changes in diet should you be considering, particularly if Fluffy seems to be doing well on his current diet?

As in all matters related to your cat's health, you should consult with your vet. Changes in an older cat's health can happen quickly with more frequent vet visits than the traditional annual physical. As most cat owners know, cats are quite skilled in hiding their health issues and a thorough examination along with blood work is often needed to catch problems in their early stages. The decision of whether to change Fluffy's diet should be made after a thorough examination by your vet and a discussion of changes in a cat's nutritional requirements as they age.

Cats generally go through two stages of dietary changes as they age. The first is a reduction in calorie requirements that typically starts at age seven and continues to approximately 11 years.⁷ Their gastrointestinal (GI) tract efficiency has not declined but their activity levels and ability to burn calories has, particularly in desexed cats. When they reach the age of 12, their daily energy requirement may begin to increase, along with corresponding declines in their ability to take in food due to diminished GI tract function, cognitive changes, dental disease and systemic diseases such as diabetes or hyperthyroidism.

The calorie requirements of an adult cat are calculated as follows: the resting energy requirement (RER) is calculated by multiplying the weight of the cat in kilograms (kg) by 30 and then adding 70. This is the energy requirement of a completely sedentary cat. To determine the daily energy requirement (DER) of a normally active cat, multiply the DER by 1.1 to 1.2 (10-20%) depending on the activity of your cat. So,



the calorie requirements of an 8.8-pound cat (4 kg) who exhibits normal activity would be: $DER = (4 * 30) + 70 * 1.1 = 209 \text{ kCal}$. In the next life stage, the 11+ year old cat will have a higher DER to maintain weight - typically the RER multiplied by 1.25 - so, that same 8.8-pound cat would now need 237 kCal per day.

Protein requirements also change. Little research has been done on how much protein is required in senior cats as opposed to younger adult cats. Mark E. Peterson, DVM, Dip. ACVIM, observes that optimal protein intake in normal, young to middle-aged cats ranges from 5.5 to 11.5 grams or more of high-quality protein per kg of body weight. He postulates that a senior cat should be receiving at least 6-8 g per kg of body weight—preferably more. He recommends that this protein should come from high quality foods that derive 50% of their calories from animal protein, not plants. It would be nearly impossible to maintain optimal muscle mass and body weight by feeding foods less than 40% protein—too many calories would have to be eaten. He also observed that only meat proteins have the necessary amino acids needed by obligate carnivores like cats.⁴

How and What Should I Feed My Senior Cat?

Fluffy gets an annual check-up and everything is great! But a couple of months later, you notice your kitty is looking a little pudgy in the middle. You investigate and learn that Fluffy has gained half a pound! If

there's been no significant changes in diet, this is a sign that your pet has entered the period of life where he requires less calories.

But how to adjust? That depends on how and what you are currently feeding Fluffy. If you are free feeding and simply fill his bowl whenever it is empty, it will be next to impossible to determine how to change. The first step in successful dietary management for a senior cat is to change Fluffy to strict meal or portion feeding and carefully measure the food portions. You should do this over a period of two to three weeks, gradually decreasing the amount of food in the free feed bowl while establishing a daily feeding of two or more divided meals, based on your cat's DER.⁸

That's great, you say, but how do I meal feed Fluffy along with the rest of my cats and know who's eating what food? Admittedly, meal feeding cats is a bit of a challenge but there are strategies you can implement to make this an easier task. If you only have two or three cats, you can feed them in separate rooms or separate crates. If your answer to the question "How many cats do you have?" is "Enough...", you can implement a solution like the one shown in Figure 1. (Photo courtesy Trisha Seifried, CatBoss.TV). Each cat has its own separate crate and they are called to the crates at mealtime. This feeding technique has multiple benefits. Loss of appetite, often the first warning sign of a health issue, is obvious when there is only one cat feeding in each crate. It also aids in crate training your cats, as crates be-

come a desirable place to be. Crate feeding makes it easier to secure your cats when that repairman who likes to leave the door open comes to visit, or during a storm when you need your cats in a safer place than the big bay window that is about to be smashed by a tree limb.

Fast forward a few weeks. Fluffy has now adjusted to meal feeding and you know exactly how much food he is eating, but the weight gain continues—what now? First, always consult with your vet on any dietary changes. Vets will likely recommend one of two road maps: change your food or change the amount you feed. If your cat is otherwise thriving on his current food, your vet may simply recommend you feed less. You will want to be sure, though, that the decreased amount of food is still providing adequate amounts of lean animal protein to maintain proper muscle mass.

You analyze the protein levels in the reduced amounts of Fluffy's current diet and find it unacceptably low. Now what? There are literally hundreds of cat food products labeled for senior cats. Which one should you choose? Are they formulated for cats who require fewer calories? Or more calories? Do they have adequate protein and moisture? What about phosphorus levels—are they appropriate for the age of your cat? Also keep in mind that your cat may eventually need higher calorie levels than when he was an adult. Again, consult with your vet. Planning a diet now that you can flex up in calories when the time comes can save your

cat from the stress of having to change diets. If your lower calorie diet is rich in protein and low in phosphorus, which is important in maintaining kidney and urinary tract health, you will find it easier to add more protein while you add more calories.

What If My Cat Won't Eat Enough?

This can be a challenge in any age of cat but is particularly difficult to deal with in older cats. While periodic fasting in other animals is not harmful, it can cause serious damage to a cat's liver. Cats need to eat on a regular basis for optimum health. The first stop when a cat won't eat is always the vet. They could have dental issues, underlying systemic diseases, cancer or diabetes. All these things need to be ruled out.

If your cat is once again given a clean bill of health, then maybe a change in food is in order. Just like people, cats can get bored with what they eat. Before changing the food, however, you might try some toppers like freeze dried raw food, gravy specifically formulated for cats, nutritional yeast, probiotics, bonito flakes or even the desiccated chicken treats exhibitors refer to as "Kitty Crack". These additives are highly palatable to most cats and can help persuade even the pickiest cat to eat their dinner. If they don't help, don't hesitate to consult your vet. Mirtazapine, a frequently prescribed appetite stimulant, is available in a transdermal formulation that is applied to the inside of your cat's ear. It's easy to work with and very effective.

If it does come to a change of food, then make sure you change the diet SLOWLY. The importance of this cannot be over-emphasized. Even as younger animals, cats do not always adapt well to a change in diet, and if they have struggled to adapt in the past, expect the issue to be magnified as they age. New foods should be introduced over a period of two to three weeks, or even longer if you know your cat has challenges in this area. Adding probiotics or pumpkin to the food can help alleviate any litter box issues produced by the change in food.

Figure 1
Separate mealtime crate setup

opposite: microchip feeder



What If My Cat Needs a Prescription Diet?

A substantial portion of aging cats eventually require some sort of prescription diet to address various health conditions. This is where the crate feeding method discussed earlier can demonstrate its greatest value. With crate feeding, you don't need to worry about the prescription-diet cat getting into its feline friends' food, or vice versa. But not everyone has the space for the kind of setup we've illustrated. And if you just have two or three cats, there's another way to address the situation that guarantees each cat will receive its intended meal. Technology has come to the rescue of the senior cat owner with the advent of the microchip feeder.

We talked to MaryAnn Schwartz of Epping, New Hampshire about her experiences with these feeders. "I got them because I had two senior Ragdolls with very different dietary

\$250 or more. They are readily available from Amazon, Chewy and other online sources.

MaryAnn added that "cats are like kids and my two always wanted what the other had. Chianti in particular. He would literally try to push Shiraz away from his feeder while eating and then try to stick his own head to snag what his brother was eating. It never worked. As soon as Shiraz was away from the sensor, the feeder closed." After Shiraz crossed the Bridge, MaryAnn eventually acquired a mixed-breed kitten which is now happily dining out of her predecessor's feeder. So, the feeders make sense for the other cats in the household too. We believe they are an excellent compromise between meal feeding and free feeding; they make portion control very easy and specific to the individual cat, yet the cat is still able to eat whenever it wants. With a waning appetite, that can be very important.

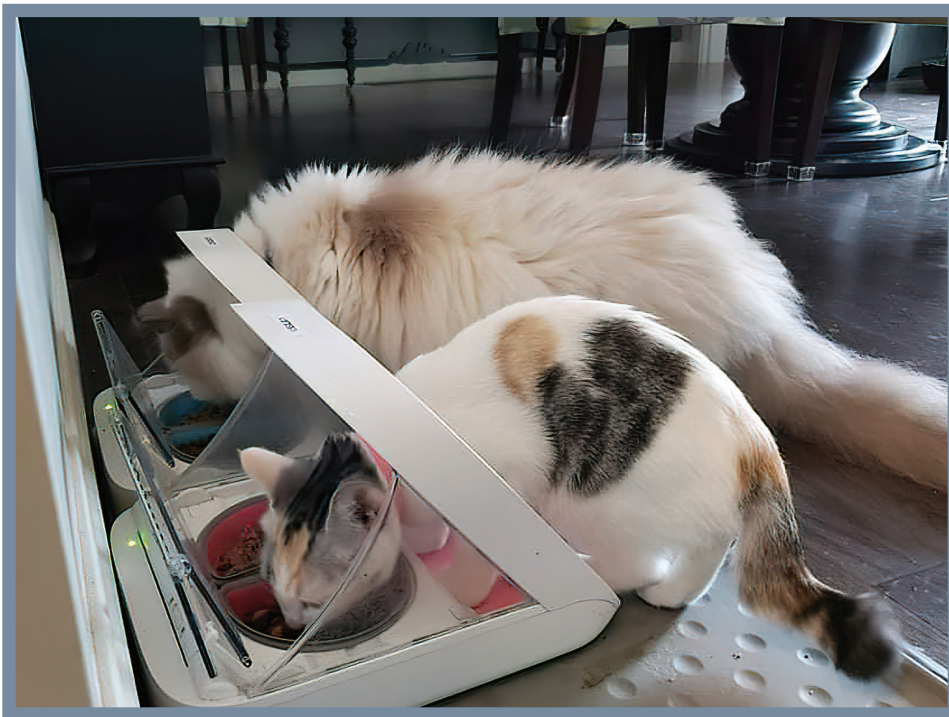


photo courtesy MaryAnn Schwartz

needs. One had IBD and the other was prone to bladder stones. The feeders were a blessing. Each cat could eat anytime they wanted to, but only from their own feeder." Food is placed in a dish inside the covered feeder, which only opens when activated by a microchip that you place on the cat's collar. If you don't want to use a collar, the feeder can also be synced with your pet's internal microchip. Prices for these feeders start at approximately \$150 and go up to

In closing, we want to emphasize again that when it comes to managing a senior cat's diet, it's essential to look beyond its age and consider the big picture. Consult with your vet, consult with your breeder, and set a tentative timeline for dietary changes well before it's time to make them. That way you'll be in the best position to address the challenges we've raised here and to keep your kitty well fed and happy for the longest possible time.

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