Senior Cat

Feeding Senior Cats

Cats may enter their "senior" years at about 7 years of age; however, with a typically longer life expectancy compared to dogs, this life stage can be divided into 2 categories: "mature" from 7-12 years and "geriatric" when 12 years and older. These categories are defined by some common changes that can occur in activity levels, metabolism, and ability to digest key nutrients, including fat and protein, which can affect body weight, lean body mass, immune system, digestive system, and skin. Nutrition tailored to the unique needs of cats throughout their senior years can help them live longer, healthier lives.

Key Messages

- Although all cats aged 7+ may be considered “seniors,” those over age 12 are very different from those 7-12 years of age:
  - Mature cats often become overweight, especially up to about 10 years of age, which may be at least partly due to their reduced energy (calorie) needs.
  - From 12 years, cats can start to lose weight, which may be caused by a reduced ability to digest fat and protein, and other metabolic changes.
  - Aging cats slowly lose lean body mass (e.g., muscle). With advanced age, many lose weight and lean body mass, such that underweight conditions (sometimes referred to as the “skinny old cat syndrome”) are far more common than obesity in cats over 12 years of age.
- There are no established nutrient profiles for the senior cat life stage. However, several nutritional interventions have been shown to be beneficial:
  - Cats aged 7-12 years: reduced levels of fat and calories and higher levels of fiber and protein to minimize weight gain.
  - From 12 years: a highly digestible diet with higher levels of protein and fat to help maintain lean body mass and ideal body condition. A diet higher in protein, essential fatty acids, prebiotics and antioxidants (e.g., vitamins C and E) helps support an aging immune system and overall health.
- Aging cats should be fed to maintain ideal body condition (i.e., avoiding underweight or overweight) and preserve lean body mass for optimal health and longevity.
  - Purina’s groundbreaking 9-year study showed that a proprietary blend of nutrients, with antioxidants, essential fatty acids, and a prebiotic, helped improve and extend the lives of healthy cats by an average of 1 year. The study showed that **maintaining weight and lean body mass in non-obese cats helped senior cats live longer**.
    - The study also showed that cats eating the diet with the proprietary nutrient blend had higher serum vitamin E levels. Higher vitamin E levels were positively correlated with survival. Vitamin E is

an important antioxidant that can mitigate the increased oxidative stress that occurs with aging.

Additional Resources

Perez-Camargo, G. (2004). Cat nutrition: What is new in the old? *Compendium on Continuing Education for the Practicing Veterinarian, 26*(2A), 5–10.

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Laflamme, D., & Gunn-Moore, D. (2014). Nutrition of aging cats. *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice, 44*(4), 761–774. doi: 10.1016/j.cvsm.2014.03.001

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The Purina Institute aims to help put nutrition at the forefront of pet health discussions by providing user-friendly, science-based information that helps pets live longer, healthier lives.

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