

# The Lowdown on Treats

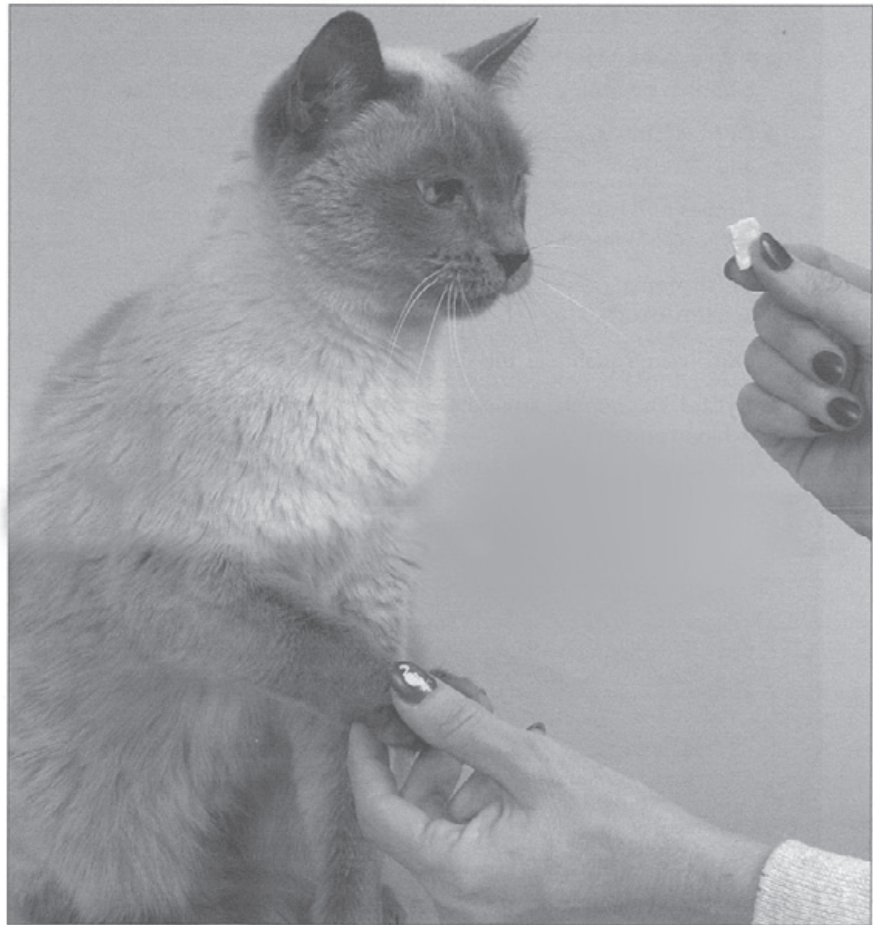
Our experts dish out advice on offering people food to cats.

**W**hen Dan Perepelitza tried to medicate Phoebe, his 10-year-old American longhair, he attempted “pilling” her the old-fashioned way. Predictably, Phoebe spit the pill out and scooted under the couch. Because it was critical for Phoebe to take 5 milligrams of prednisone daily, Perepelitza tried various methods. Finally, he resorted to crushing the pill in canned tuna — and that worked like a charm. Now, when he opens the refrigerator door, Phoebe saunters into the kitchen and meows softly as if to say, “More tuna, please.”

While it seems only natural to pamper cats with delectable treats, be aware that some are not “complete or balanced” nutritionally unless certified with the AAFCO stamp of approval. The Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) establishes quality standards in the pet and animal industry.

According to Sally Perea, DVM, *Catnip* advisor and a board-certified veterinary nutritionist in Davis, California, “Treats should not exceed 10 percent of your cat’s daily caloric intake. I’m not too concerned with snacks being nutritious. They are geared to be tasty and palatable so people can have a little bond with their cat.”

But cats have different nutritional needs than humans — and dogs for that matter — and require the equivalent of twice the protein. So, which human foods are healthy for cats and which should be avoided? With the help of Dr. Perea and other feline experts, we examine a host of common foods as well as address the pros and cons of home cooking for cats.



WILHELM HULTIN

**Teach your cat a new trick or reinforce good behavior by using healthy treats for motivation.**

**#1. Tuna:** Phoebe’s tuna snack — roughly one tablespoon — falls well below the 10 percent of her daily 200- to 300- calorie intake, so it is appropriate, explains Dr. Perea. However, this snack should never be the mainstay of any cat’s diet. Although high in protein, canned tuna lacks essential vitamins A and E as well as taurine, calcium and iron. Vitamin A deficiency can lead to weight loss, night blindness and eye infections.

**#2. Cooked liver:** Cooked liver is an excellent source of vitamin A. But too much liver can be as damaging as too little. The daily feline requirement is 5 grams, or less than one-quarter of an ounce. Cats fed primarily liver may develop vitamin A toxicity — causing poor appetite, a dull-looking coat and a deformity of vertebrae in the neck. If your cat enjoys this tasty treat, remember a little goes a long way. Be sure to

## Feline no-no foods

Here's a list of foods that may be dangerous to feed your cat:

- **Alcohol.** Any beverage containing alcohol can intoxicate your cat, suppress his nervous system and cause respiratory failure.
- **Chicken bones.** These bones can splinter and lodge in your cat's throat, causing choking, or damage the intestines and other internal organs.
- **Coffee and caffeinated teas.** These beverages stimulate the central nervous system and cardiac system. Within several hours of ingestion, caffeine can cause vomiting and heart palpitations in cats.
- **Raw egg whites.** These dairy items contain an enzyme that destroys biotin, an essential B family vitamins. Cooked eggs are safe to feed cats.
- **Onions/chives/garlic.** These herbs can affect a cat's red blood cells and cause Heinz anemia.
- **Grapes and raisins.** These fruits contain an unknown toxin that may cause kidney damage in cats.
- **Mushrooms.** These fungi can contain toxins that affect multiple systems in cats.
- **Salt.** In large quantities, this spice can lead to electrolyte imbalances.
- **Xylitol.** This popular artificial sweetener can cause a sudden drop in blood pressure, resulting in seizures.

— By Adriane Bishko



Some artificial sweeteners contain xylitol, an ingredient that can be harmful if licked by a cat.

cook all meat, advises Dr. Perea. Ingesting raw liver can introduce salmonella and *E. coli* into your cat's digestive system.

**#3. Onions/Chives/Garlic:** Many veterinarians recommend that cats do not ingest onions, chives, leeks or garlic. These members of the allium family can affect red blood cells and cause a blood disorder called Heinz body anemia, characterized by small, irregular deep purple granules under the microscope.

In a 1998 study published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Association*, commercial baby food — with and without onion powder — was fed to 42 healthy cats. Those fed formulas containing onion powder had significantly higher Heinz body percentages and decreases in PCV (packed cell volume), indicating anemia. Symptoms included vomiting, diarrhea, discolored urine and decreased appetite. If you are feeding your cat a bland diet of baby food to settle his stomach, be sure to check the ingredients carefully. Some manufacturers have added onion powder to enhance the taste. Avoid baby food containing onion powder.

The safety of garlic in pet food is controversial. According to Susan Little, DVM, a veterinarian board certified in feline medicine and president of the Winn-Feline Foundation, "Toxicity is dose dependent, and the amount of garlic usually added for flavoring is well below the toxic amount."

**#4. Chocolate:** Chocolate can be lethal to your cat. In fact, as little as one-half ounce of baking chocolate per pound of body weight can cause clinical signs of illness. Theobromine, the bitter alkaloid found in this sweet, acts as a stimulant to the central nervous and cardiovascular systems.

But not all chocolates are equal in the amount of this alkaloid. Unsweetened Baker's Chocolate, for example, contains eight to 10 times more theobromine than milk chocolate. The amount a pet can tolerate varies, depending on the ani-

mal's weight and type of chocolate eaten, reports the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Hotline.

If you discover that your cat or dog has ingested chocolate, contact your veterinarian or the ASPCA's hotline (888-426-4435) immediately. Be prepared to tell them the size and weight of your pet, amount and type of chocolate eaten and how long ago it was ingested. Depending on the particulars, you may be advised to induce vomiting in your pet at home or take your pet to the veterinarian.

**#5. Milk:** Most cats are lactose intolerant. In other words, they cannot break down the major sugar found in cow's milk because they lack certain essential enzymes. When lactose remains undigested, it ferments in the cat's intestine, causing diarrhea. If your cat enjoys milk, select a lactose-free version available at most pet supply stores. Yogurt may also be better tolerated by your cat's digestive system than cow's milk because it contains less lactose.

**#6. Starchy snacks:** Carbohydrates make up to 40 percent of dry cat food and serve to provide essential texture and form to the kibble. However, cats do not need carbs (sugars and starches) for energy and most prefer meaty treats to starchy snacks. Small morsels of wheat flakes, cooked potatoes and cooked rice are perfectly acceptable to feed your cat as treats, but vegetables, such as string beans, may be hard for them to digest.

**Home cooking debate**

When your veterinarian recommends a bland diet, commercial baby food may be just what the doctor ordered. Remember to choose a meat variety (not pureed carrots, for example), such as cooked, skinless chicken without spices. Cats are texture-driven eaters, so adding cooked rice may be a good replacement for dry kibble, says Dr. Perea. Or, you can puree the ingredients and serve up a tasty pate.

However, it is not advisable to feed



**Canned tuna ranks high in protein but should be used as a treat and not the sole diet for your cat.**

table scraps to cats. The reason: We cook our foods with all sorts of additives that may be unhealthy or downright dangerous to cats (onions and garlic, to name two). Gravy and poultry skin can be hard for a cat to digest properly. Chicken bones can splinter or lodge in a cat's intestinal tract.

"We can unknowingly cause harm by giving cats people foods that might cause medical problems over time, and inadvertently, establish food preferences that can be difficult to change," explains Dr. Little.

Take the case of Murphy, a British Bengal who dined exclusively on cooked chicken and fish for the first 7 months of his life. His legs became stunted and rotated inward. Growing kittens on a poor calcium-to-phosphorus ratio diet may develop hyperparathyroidism. Insufficient amounts of dietary calcium can cause the parathyroid to produce extra PTH in order to maintain normal levels of blood calcium. After examining Murphy, his veterinarian recommended a diet of commercial cat food, plus calcium supplements.

In a recent presentation at the American Veterinary Medical Association's conference, Tony Buffington, DVM, PhD, a professor of clinical sciences at Ohio State University, cautioned his colleagues that it is difficult to match the benefits of quality commercial foods in home-cooked formulas. For pet owners determined to go the home-cooking route, he advised that they consult the nutrition book, *Home-Prepared Dog & Cat Diets: The Healthful Alternative*, by Donald Strombeck, DVM. Or, consult veterinary nutritionists at these websites: [www.petdiets.com](http://www.petdiets.com) and [www.balanceit.com](http://www.balanceit.com). Before changing your cat's diet, always check with your veterinarian first. 🐾

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