



Tree House Humane Society

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Feral Cat Feeding and Supplementation

At our workshops, we always tell caretakers to feed their feral cats the best food they can afford. This maxim recognizes two important things: first, that good nutrition is important and second, the caretaker's budget is also important. So like so many aspects of being a feral cat caretaker, you do the best you can without sinking your own ship. If you have the time and the money with a colony of 5 cats, and want to prepare fresh meals of raw chicken, steamed vegetables and vitamin-mineral supplements, then that is great and you should. But if you are pressed for time, trying to feed 30 cats and can barely afford supermarket brands of cat food, then that is also great, and your sacrifice is no less.

Nutrition for feral cats is particularly important given the rigors of their outdoor lives, and is the single most important thing you can do to help regulate their health. That said, it behooves any animal caretaker to gain a basic knowledge of nutrition. We urge you not to simply follow what anyone, including your veterinarian, says about nutrition, but educate yourself and make your own decisions. Few vets study nutrition for more than a few hours, and most just repeat what the supposedly "scientific" pet food manufacturers tell them. Like most people, vets usually do not know how to analyze the ingredients on a pet food label, have not heard of the best brands, do not realize that dry food is just wet food baked to a crisp (with the vitamins usually added before the baking and so ruined), that a raw chicken neck will do more for an animal's teeth than 100 pounds of dry food, and so on. You will know more than most about animal nutrition by reading any of the following:

- **The New Natural Cat** by Anita Frazier
- **Dr. Pitcairn's Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs & Cats** by Dr. Richard Pitcairn, DVM
- **Food Pets Die For** by Ann N. Martin
- **Protect Your Pet** by Ann N. Martin
- **Cats (and Dogs) are People Too!** by Sharon Gannon

Ground Chuck

Ground chuck costs less than even inexpensive cats foods and, given raw, provides excellent nutrition. Any food that lists byproducts of any kind is not nutritious. The largest ingredients are listed in order of amount on the label. Meat or poultry byproducts can be feathers, hooves, or eyes - anything not normally associated with consumption. Any food, especially dry food, that lists corn meal as one of the primary ingredients is not nutritious, and cats do not digest it well. It is like feeding them a diet of potato chips. Cheaper foods may even contain rendered cats and dogs and are cheaper because the ingredients are inferior.

Like so many caretakers, if you cannot afford the higher quality brands, there are easy and inexpensive ways to boost the nutritional value of lower quality brands of wet food. The simplest is adding raw ground chuck.

Ground chuck is cheaper than even cheap cat foods and, given raw, provides excellent nutrition. Remember that cats are carnivores and, in the wild, eat their prey raw. Raw meat alone would be an unbalanced diet, but added to inferior food will definitely make an improvement. Just make sure the meat is fresh and has not been sitting out on the supermarket's shelf for more than a day. Also (very important!) add a teaspoon of calcium (either in the form of bone meal or calcium lactate) to each pound of raw meat. This is essential to balancing the high phosphorus content of the meat. Failing to add the calcium could lead to long-term ill effects.

In Anita Frazier's "The New Natural Cat," there is a recipe for a vitamin-mineral mix, easily and cheaply made, which makes a great supplement to any food, expensive or supermarket. Some steamed vegetables, like broccoli, carrots or zucchini, will enhance your feral cats' diets as well.

Vitamin C to the Rescue (*excerpt from "The New Natural Cat," by Anita Frazier*)

It is certainly easier, cheaper and a lot more pleasant to prevent illness than it is to trap a sick cat, transport him to a vet, and then try to diagnose and treat the frightened animal.

Vitamin C, the first vitamin discovered by humankind, is truly a friend indeed to the caregiver of a feral colony. An efficient healer and powerful protector, it works like a nutritional knight in shining armor fighting against invasions and battling stress of all kinds. Germs, viruses, dirt, x-rays and chemicals such as antibiotics, steroids, tranquilizers, anesthetics, pesticides and the preservatives in commercial pet foods have all been shown to use up large quantities of Vitamin C.

Healthy cats can make some Vitamin C in their intestine. The operative words here are "healthy" and "some." Cats can manufacture enough C only if the diet is rich in all the other nutrients they need and only if daily stresses do not become too numerous, too extreme or too prolonged. Stresses such as extreme heat or cold, fighting, being wounded or hurt, being trapped or caged, loud noises, strong, unpleasant smells or forced change of territory use up Vitamin C at an alarming rate. Even a healthy, well-nourished cat couldn't produce enough to cover the kinds and amounts of stress faced by the feral on a daily basis. Depletion of Vitamin C leaves a cat easy prey to every germ or virus that happens along.

The life of a feral cat, especially a city feral, is full of stress every day. Any trap-neuter-release program is bound to include being trapped, caged, cut and having a shocking number of chemicals used on the body. The smell of the cage cleaner alone is enough to reduce a cat's Vitamin C to the danger level. The rest of the veterinary procedures raise the stress level to astronomical proportions. Is it any wonder that many succumb to upper respiratory and other diseases shortly after their neutering experience? What we need here is a knight in shining armor to bring the cats safely through all this stress. Enter Vitamin C. Just as Rescue Remedy works on the emotional plane, Vitamin C works on the physical body. This inexpensive and easily obtainable supplement will greatly enhance any cat's chance for survival.

The most common forms of Vitamin C are calcium ascorbate (which used in the buffered variety tastes nasty), ascorbic acid and sodium ascorbate. Ascorbic acid is usually the cheapest and has the happy side effect of acidifying the urine. An acid urine prevents the growth of germs and the formation of crystals in the bladder. When found in its natural state in foods, Vitamin C is accompanied by bioflavonoids, rutin and hesperadin. Science has found that these nutritional sidekicks are provided by nature to help the body absorb the C and put it to work more efficiently. A cheap jar of ascorbic acid powder will certainly give a lot of support and protection and it will help acidify the urine. A C complex powder of ascorbic acid with bioflavonoids, rutin and hesperadin will do a lot more for only a little more money. Health food stores will have several choices available. I use Twin Lab Super C, yellow label.

Vitamin C does not need refrigeration but you must keep the contents of the bottle dry. Use a clean, dry measuring spoon. Vitamin C cannot be stored by the body so it must be given every meal. A cat can absorb no more than 250 milligrams at a time; in most brands that's 1/8th tsp. of powder. If everything is going well for a colony, I give only 125 milligrams or 250 for each two cats. If the weather turns harsh or some other stress presents itself, increase the dose to 250 milligrams per cat. During trap-neuter-release projects when stress will skyrocket, I give the full dose for two days before trapping. During confinement and treatment, I feed three or four small meals a day in order to get the C into them more frequently. If a cat objects to the sour flavor, as happens occasionally, cut the dose down by half or use just a few grains. Any amount is better than zero. I find I can get away with more if I add a "bribe food," something they love that has a strong flavor. PetGuard savory seafood works very well. You can also sprinkle brewer's yeast on top.

Because we are practicing prevention, caregivers may find it difficult at first to pinpoint a clear demonstration of results. The benefits are mostly about what does not happen. Cats do not die under anesthesia; wounds do not become infected; there is no outbreak of respiratory infections shortly after a new cat arrives in the colony. Resistance is high; the cats are more resilient.

I would not feel even half as secure about managing a feral colony if I didn't have the help of Vitamin C, my trusty knight in shining armor, to back me up.

(Thanks to Neighborhood Cats of New York for this very informative article!)

More Food Supplements

Adding food supplements at feeding time is a great way to boost the health of your feral cats. Here are a few other good, easy-to-find supplements and their uses:

Cod Liver Oil

Cod liver oil provides cats and dogs with an excellent source of all natural vitamins A and D, plus the important Omega-3 fatty acids, DHA and EPA. Omega-3 fatty acids support healthy skin and coat, joints, heart, brain, eyes, growth and reproduction. All natural vitamins A and D support vision, immune function and healthy bones.

Nutritional or Brewer's Yeast

This is a healthy substitute for chemical-based flea control products and aids the immune system with high levels of B complex, zinc, selenium and antioxidants in the body and bloodstream. A strong immune system and high nutrient levels help repel insects and boosts overall health.

(source: www.alternativemedicine.com)

If your cat or dog has a severe flea problem, it is often a signal that their health is not as it should be. Many commercial pet foods are nutritionally inadequate and contain harmful additives and by-products. By feeding your animals a high-quality, natural diet, free of additives and preservatives, you improve their health and dramatically increase their protection from fleas. A healthy animal does not taste or smell as good to fleas. Use about a teaspoon of yeast daily for cats and small dogs, and a tablespoon for a 50-pound dog. Some animals are yeast intolerant and will react with a skin allergy. Discontinue use if this occurs. Combine the yeast with the garlic in your animal's food, and consider doubling the dosage during peak flea season.

Other natural repellents include vitamin B1 (thiamine) and apple cider vinegar. (See your veterinarian for the correct amount of a vitamin B1 supplement for your pet.) The dosage of apple cider vinegar is about one teaspoon daily in the pet's drinking water. Apple cider vinegar helps strengthen the immune system as well.

More Natural Flea Control

Grooming

If you are able to, comb your cat or dog daily with a flea comb. Bathing animals regularly is also advised. There is no need to use chemical flea shampoos. A water bath with a gentle soap that will not irritate their skin is sufficient to eliminate existing fleas.

Soap Traps

You can trap fleas by placing a dish of soapy water under a night light near where your pet sleeps. Fleas are attracted to warm light and will easily drown in the soapy water. This works for adult fleas only, but with diligence, can be very effective in reducing the flea population. Fleas already residing on your pet are not likely to leave, so you will still need to flea comb and/or bathe them in a mild shampoo (even a baby shampoo will work as fleas don't survive well in soapy water). If the idea of keeping a soapy water

dish near your pet is not attractive, plug-in flea traps are available. These electric traps are equally, if not more, effective. They seem to work well for ants, as we have noticed in our personal experience.

Sanitization

Fleas lay their eggs everywhere -- in carpets, curtains, upholstery, animal bedding, cracks and crevices. Destroying the fleas' eggs by thorough weekly vacuuming and frequent washing of animal bedding goes to the source of the problem and will help eliminate the flea population in your house. After vacuuming, be sure to replace the bag right away and take the old bag out of the house. Keeping clutter on the floor to a minimum also will deprive the fleas of hiding places

Nematodes

While you can't kill off the fleas that your pet is going to encounter when it goes outside, you can keep the population down in the area around your house by using nematodes. These microscopic worms eat flea larvae and are therefore a natural way to control the flea population. You can purchase nematodes online or at pet and garden stores. Place them in moist, shady spots near your house as neither fleas nor nematodes survive in the hot sun. As nematodes multiply rapidly, you have only to introduce a small number to have the desired effect.

Home Remedies and Supplements for Upper Respiratory Infections (URI)

Many supplements can be helpful upon the detection of an upper respiratory infection. If possible, the infected cat should be isolated from other cats. The following measures should be taken if and when possible:

- Put the cat into a steamy room (like a bathroom with shower) for about an hour several times per day.
- Clean the eyes of mucus and apply a drop or two of mild saline solution with **Goldenseal Tincture** in each eye (Goldenseal is an antiseptic).
- Alternate Goldenseal with **Eyebright** drops at every other application.
- In the case of a Herpes virus, which is similar in symptoms to a URI, add one quarter tablet of **L-Lysine** and 500mg of **Vitamin C** to the food daily.
- Drop one drop of saline solution into the cat's nostrils until the cat sneezes. This will help clear the nose and soften the tissues. This can be the same saline solution as used in the eye.
- Increase supplementation of the diet, to include high doses of vitamin C. **Echinacea** and/or Goldenseal can be helpful, too.
- If the eyes are very irritated or sensitive, or if the cat's nostrils look raw, you can apply a drop of **Cod Liver Oil** to them daily. Cod Liver Oil lubricates and will nourish the eye tissues.
- Isolate the cat from other cats in your care until symptoms subside.
- If the cat will not eat, offer chicken broth or soup after cleaning the eyes and nose.