

Nutrition of Aging Cats



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KEYWORDS

• Nutrition • Geriatric • Aging • Protein • Energy • Carbohydrates

KEY POINTS

- Changes in body weight, body condition score (BCS), and muscle mass can be especially meaningful in older cats: weight loss is often the first sign of disease in aging cats whereas loss of lean body mass (LBM) is a risk factor for increased mortality.
- Approximately 35% of geriatric cats have reduced ability to digest fat, and 20% have reduced ability to digest protein, which can contribute to weight loss and loss of lean body mass.
- To help compensate for undesired loss of weight or condition, many older cats may benefit from a highly palatable, highly digestible, energy-dense food that is offered in small amounts frequently: diets formulated for kittens can be a good option.
- Appropriate feeding management helps address some aspects of environmental enrichment and stress management, which can be particularly important in aging cats.
- Nutritional intervention can be beneficial for cats with many age-related diseases, but appropriate attention must be paid to total nutrient intake, calorie intake, and maintenance of body weight.

INTRODUCTION

Improvements in nutrition, health care, and management have led to many cats living to increasingly greater ages. Although the specific proportions differ among different studies, at least one-third of cats seen by veterinarians are 7 years of age or older, approximately 20% 10 years of age or older, and nearly 13% of cats are 12 years of age or older.^{1,2}

Aging brings with it physiologic changes, even in apparently healthy cats. Some examples include a general decline in body and coat condition, failing senses (sight and smell), and altered behaviors.³ Some changes are less obvious and may include decreased physiologic reserves and reduced functionality of the digestive, immune, renal, and other systems. Many of these physiologic changes, including changes in body weight and composition and in energy requirements, occur at predictable

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ages. Based on the onset of these changes, the feline population is divided into 4 distinctive life stages: growth; adult, for cats up to 6 years of age; mature, 7 until 12 years, a period when many cats become overweight or obese and are more likely to show evidence of chronic diseases; and geriatric, 12 years and above, when body weight tends to decrease progressively to below ideal and terminal conditions are increasingly recognized.^{1,4,5} The focus of this article is the mature and geriatric age groups.

Chronologic age does not always match physiologic age. Thus, older cats must be cared for and fed based on their individual needs.

Management of aging cats can require changes in their care. Older cats often cope poorly with changes in their daily routine. Their response to stress is often to stop eating, hide, and/or alter their toileting habits. Illnesses or any change within the environment, the family, or even the diet can act as a source of stress. Because dietary changes can be stressful, it is important to make changes slowly. Sick cats should be stable, if possible, before introducing a new food to reduce stress and avoid food aversion. Environmental enrichment, which is important for all cats, should be specifically tailored for elderly cats (Table 1).

PHYSICAL AND NUTRITIONAL EVALUATION OF AGING CATS

Evaluation of aging cats begins with a good medical history, with open-ended questions about activity, attitudes, and behaviors, including changes in feeding, sleeping, litter box, and social behaviors.³ Further questioning regarding bathroom habits can suggest problems with urinary or gastrointestinal function. A fecal score chart indicating stool softness and color can help identify diarrhea or constipation.

The physical examination should begin by observing a cat from a distance, assessing breathing patterns, gait, posture, and coordination, among other things. Evidence of physical weakness may be linked to nutritional deficiencies, such as potassium or thiamine. Evaluation of skin and hair coat can indicate underlying medical or nutritional

Table 1 Environmental adjustments for aging cats	
Key resource	All resources should be easily accessed. If an elderly cat has to walk too far for its food or water, it may do without.
Food	Place on lower surface or provide ramps for easy access. Raise the food bowl up by a couple inches, especially for arthritic cats. Food should be separate from water.
Water	Place on lower surface or provide ramps for easy access. Raise the water bowl up by a couple inches, especially for arthritic cats. Water should be separate from food.
Resting places	Provide multiple, elevated platforms with padded, comfortable bedding. Provide ramps for easy access. Warmed beds can be soothing.
Latrine sites	Provide 1 litter box per cat, plus 1 in multiple cat households. Use large, low-sided boxes for each access. Keep boxes within easy reach of the cats. Sandy-type litter is easier on cats' paws.
Hiding places or exit routes	Provide easily accessed hiding places, including elevated sites. Provide ramps for easy access. In multipet households, assure cats can have time alone if they desire. Do not presume an elderly cat can comfortably use a cat door flap.
Companionship	Elderly cats may have a decreased or increased desire for human companionship. Cat may grieve at the loss of a long-time companion. Introduction of a new cat or dog can be stressful for elderly cats.

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