Does fish-flavored cat food cause GI upset?

Shelter staff debate whether or not fish-flavored cat food is harmful to young kittens- Dr. Schumacher asks a nutrition expert and they both weigh in.

Question:

We are currently having a debate as to whether it is harmful to feed fish flavored canned food to underage (under 8 weeks of age) kittens. I have seen some documentation in other resources advising against such food because it may cause tummy upset in young kittens. We currently free feed all kittens (9 months and younger) a dry food formulated for kittens and supplement it with Friskies brand canned cat food. We typically have restricted 8 week and under kittens to only get the non-fish flavored (poultry, liver, etc.) flavors. Needless to say, we do feed KMR to those kittens who have not been weaned yet. I would be interested to know your thoughts.

Answer:

Thank you so much for your question! It is so important to ensure the animals in our care are receiving proper nutrition for their life stage. Kittens are particularly vulnerable, especially if they are being weaned from a milk replacer instead of their own mother’s milk.

There is no evidence to suggest that feeding fish-flavored canned food is harmful to kittens or adult cats- we know because we looked! The idea that fish-flavored food can cause stomach upset in cats or kittens is somewhat widespread but when we tried to find any facts supporting this, we came up empty. We consulted with a board-certified veterinary nutritionist to be sure we weren’t missing something, and this was her reply:

“I have also heard the advice to avoid fish when feeding cats, sometimes connected to the idea that cats become “addicted” to
fish-based foods. I think this simply reflects that cats are known to get fixed flavor and texture preferences which makes it important to offer a variety of foods in kittenhood. Since fish is a common pet food ingredient, it is often implicated in this phenomenon (in addition fish tends to be a strong flavor which may have more of an effect, but this is speculation). I suppose it’s also possible that if a cat was offered a meal of fish-based food and it found that very palatable, it may overeat which could result in vomiting and could encourage the idea that the food itself caused GI upset.

Regarding GI upset, I wonder if this is also related to the most commonly implicated food allergens in cats being beef, fish, and chicken ([https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26753610](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26753610))- this is for food allergy related to skin specifically but these concepts are often applied to GI disease as well although it’s not proven (and cats with GI signs plus itching are more likely to be truly food allergic). However, as far as we know, the “most common allergen” lists are more related to the commonality of those ingredients, since animals are more likely to develop adverse responses to foods to which they are chronically exposed, rather than some inherent characteristic of that food per se.”

While we know there isn’t any evidence that fish-flavored food causes GI problems in kittens, it is extremely common for kittens to develop some degree of gastrointestinal upset, especially during the weaning process or with rapid food changes. While some cats may be sensitive to fish/seafood in their diet, there are just as many that may be sensitive to beef or other common ingredients in cat food. The most important tool we have to prevent gastrointestinal upset due to food is to ensure that any diet change is made gradually.

The American Animal Hospital Association/American Association of Feline Practitioners [Feline Life Stage Guidelines](https://www.aahanet.org) state: “Satisfactory diets for cats contain all the required nutrients in proper balance, are palatable and digestible, and are free of spoilage and contaminants. The specific source of nutrients in feline diets is irrelevant when these criteria are satisfied. Both canned and dry food have been found to support health during all life stages.” They do not make any mention of avoiding fish in
cat foods and in fact, mention that it is important to introduce a variety of textures and flavors to kittens early on to limit development of food preferences (“picky eaters”).

When it comes to shelter feeding protocols, keeping things simple is helpful to ensure rules are followed. However, it is just as important to have a good monitoring and reporting system in place so that any issues (i.e. loose stool, low appetite, vomiting, etc.) are recognized and addressed as soon as possible. Click here for more information and helpful tools for daily monitoring in the shelter.

Lastly, kittens that are not of age to be available for adoption should be placed in foster homes whenever possible. Not only will we protect the kittens from exposure to infectious disease in the shelter, a foster parent has more time than shelter staff to devote to monitoring diet and ensuring changes occur gradually.

For more detailed information on raising kittens, see our Guide to Raising Underage Kittens.

I hope this has been helpful!

Thanks to Jennifer A. Larsen, DVM, PhD, DACVN, (Chief of Service, Nutrition Support Service, Veterinary Medicine Teaching Hospital, UC Davis; Professor of Clinical Nutrition, Department of Molecular Biosciences, School of Veterinary Medicine, UC Davis) for her assistance with this reply!

Erica Schumacher, DVM
Outreach Veterinarian
Shelter Medicine Program
University of Wisconsin – School of Veterinary Medicine
www.uwsheltermedicine.com
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