

Nutritional recommendations for shelter animals

What should you feed shelter animals? How much? How often? This information sheet includes basic guidelines that will help keep shelter animals healthy.

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Introduction

Feeding an appropriate quantity and good quality diet is an important part of shelter animal care:

- Adequate nutrients help animals ward off disease.
- A consistent, readily digestible diet fed in appropriate quantity will reduce the incidence of diarrhea and gastrointestinal upset.
 - This is important because diet-induced diarrhea can be confused with diarrhea caused by infectious disease, leading to un-necessary treatment, isolation or even euthanasia.
- Feeding appropriate amounts prevents obesity.
- Modeling responsible feeding practices provides a good example for the public.

Quantity of food

The two most common nutritional problems in shelter animals are:

1. Inadequate intake
2. Excessive intake

Both conditions have potentially serious consequences. Inadequate intake over time results in a reduced ability to respond to vaccination and fight off disease. Inadequate intake may be due to stress, a poor-tasting or unfamiliar diet, or an underlying disease; rarely, it may be due to simple

underfeeding.

On the other hand, excessive intake in the short term can lead to diarrhea, caused by the body taking in more nutrients than it can absorb. These leftover nutrients draw water into the bowels, resulting in diarrhea. This is uncomfortable for the animal, can discourage potential adopters and can potentially lead to a wrong diagnosis of infectious diarrhea. In the long term, excessive intake leads to obesity, which itself is a risk factor for many diseases and disorders, including but not limited to:

- Arthritis and other orthopedic diseases
- Diabetes
- Liver disease (hepatic lipidosis)
- Urinary disorders, including FIC (feline interstitial cystitis)
- Respiratory disorders
- Reduced lifespan

These conditions are difficult enough to manage in a pet animal; in a shelter animal, such conditions may well prove fatal. Obesity can also increase the risk associated with common procedures done in shelters, such as routine spay and neuter. Severe obesity also leads to difficulty grooming for cats, which is uncomfortable, predisposes to skin conditions, and potentially reduces adoptability. Adopters understandably hesitate to take home a kitty covered with greasy, unkempt clumps of hair, or with feces clinging to an unwashed bottom.

Excessive intake and shelter animal obesity is entirely within our power to prevent. In order to maintain appropriate intake, **feed a pre-measured amount** of food appropriate to the body size and age of the animal. This allows shelter staff to monitor intake and adjust as necessary. Because a decrease in appetite is often an early warning sign of disease, feeding a pre-measured quantity of food also facilitates monitoring animal health.

As a starting point, it is acceptable to feed the high end of the suggested range provided by the food manufacturer for an animal of a given size (usually available on the food bag). In shelters that house animals short term (less than 2 weeks), this will likely prove acceptable. However, when animals are housed longer term, it will be necessary to tailor the amount of food to the individual animal. Animals, like people, differ widely in their metabolic rate and activity level. Caloric requirements may differ by as much as 200% between animals. The Ohio State University has an [excellent information sheet](#) for calculating desired food quantities. Be sure staff have access to clearly marked, accurate measuring tools (e.g. scoops, cups) that are kept in the food storage areas so that the quantity of food is measured and not left to guess work.

Feeding frequency

Ideally, dogs should be fed twice daily and cats should have the opportunity to eat throughout the day. If that is not possible, cats should also be fed twice daily. All uneaten food should be removed after 24 hours. If rodents are a problem, food should not be left in runs overnight. Moderately underweight animals, puppies and kittens should be fed 3 times a day (more frequently for those under eight weeks of age). Severely underweight animals should follow a careful re-feeding program as described in the information sheet "[Starvation and Re-Feeding](#)". These animals may require feeding up to 6 times per day initially.

Monitoring success of feeding program

Shelters in which animals are routinely housed longer than 2 weeks should weigh animals on intake, then assess body condition and re-weigh the animal every two weeks. If weight is lost or gained, food quantity should be adjusted accordingly. If chronic weight loss or gain continues in spite of apparently appropriate feeding, further medical evaluation should be pursued.

Bi-monthly assessment of long term shelter residents should continue even in the face of stableweight over time, as it is sometimes possible to miss changes in condition of a shelter animal that would be more easily noticed in a pet animal with a consistent caretaker. This is especially important when animals are group-housed, in which case individual intake is impossible to monitor.

Assessing body condition

Weighing animals is useful to follow trends in weight. Weight loss may be an early sign of serious disease, while steady weight gain is undesirable for the reasons detailed above. Body weight, however, does not in itself tell you whether an animal is under- or over-weight. To determine this, a body condition scoring system should be used. The appropriate weight for a given animal should be determined by the body condition score, rather than an arbitrary breed standard. Here are some good body condition scoring charts for [cats](#) and [dogs](#).

Quality of food

It is most important that shelter animals be fed a consistent diet. Frequently switching diets predisposes animals to diarrhea. Cats in

particular adapt poorly to constant switching of food, especially when stressed, and may not eat enough if their diet often changes. All animals should be fed the best quality diet the shelter can afford, appropriate to the life stage of the animal. Good quality diets are generally more costly, but are more readily digestible. This gives animals a better chance of getting adequate nutrients even if intake is reduced by stress or disease. A good quality diet also tends to produce less stool volume and better consistency, making clean-up easier and the environment more pleasant for visitors. However, it should be kept in mind that high quality diets, unless specifically designed for weight loss, tend to be quite dense in energy. Therefore, a smaller amount may need to be fed in order to prevent obesity. Special diets, such as those for control of gastrointestinal illness or allergic skin disease should be available and used under direction of a veterinarian. Raw diets should not be used in a shelter setting because of the risk of parasites and bacterial contamination.