



**CHOOSING HEALTHY  
CAT TREATS**  
by Carol North

## Introduction

I became an advocate for improving the diets of pets as a result of 10 months of research on pet nutrition. During this period, I discovered that there is a world of information available that needed to be condensed into a more readable form for consumers who don't have time to spend doing the research but are hungry for knowledge on feeding their cats a healthy diet. All the information contained in this booklet is available to you on the Internet, but I have condensed, consolidated it and provided it for you here, saving you many hours of time and research.

Choosing healthy cat treats requires a basic knowledge of what cats need and don't need in their diets. Due to space limitations, I can't cover all of that in this booklet, but you can obtain more complete information on choosing healthy cat food by reading my book, ***Feeding Fluffy: How to Choose the Perfect Cat Food***, which will give you all the tools you need to ensure your precious pet receives the correct food to thrive.

If your cat is already eating a healthy diet of canned commercial cat food, with possibly a little high-quality dry kibble thrown in for good measure, then treats are not necessary for her optimum good health. But that's not the reason we should feed treats to our pets. Treats encourage our cats to communicate with us. They reinforce good behavior and help with training. Whatever your reason for giving them to your cat, it is important for you to know how to make healthy choices.

My husband and I are owned by 3 cats, plus a temporary resident who belongs to our son. We are fascinated by their unique personalities and readily admit to spoiling our furry "babies". Each night as bedtime approaches Lucy, a small Siamese-mix who believes my husband was born to serve her, sits in the kitchen and waits for someone to enter. She immediately goes into her little dance of wrapping herself around the unsuspecting person and begins her "song." Lucy knows that we keep containers of kitty treats on the counter, and she knows

exactly which container has the treat she wants. If the person accidentally picks up the wrong one, Lucy quickly lets her feelings be known. Should the offending treat actually be offered to her, she flips her tail and walks away.

Timid Chico, a handsome Snowshoe Siamese-mix who is perpetually hungry, waits until the treats are placed on the kitchen floor and then rushes in to snatch up as many as he can. Seventeen-year-old Abby isn't at all interested in treats, but Bella, our visitor, will eat any that we give her. This is to show you that cats don't all like the same treats, and they don't necessarily want any treat. You will have to experiment.

The important part is learning how to choose a good treat, and I hope you will gain the knowledge you need from this booklet. I believe that cats enhance our lives, and it is up to us to do what we can to enhance theirs.

*Carol North*



## Chapter 1

### Let's start at the beginning!

When you shop for treats, you will find a wide range of quality. Price is often a guide, but just because a product costs more does not guarantee it is a better choice. There are five factors to consider when buying cat treats: Nutrition, calories, quality, cost and appeal.

Nutrition and quality go hand in hand. These two factors are the most important in choosing cat treats. Although your cat may not be receiving many treats each day, you want to be sure you aren't giving them anything that could harm them.

Calories are a major concern, because you don't want to add to or cause an obesity problem. Cats ideally receive all their caloric needs with their meals. Adding more through treats can cause weight gain. Watch the calorie content in the treats you purchase and control the number of treats your cat receives. A cat should receive no more than 10% of its total calories from treats.

Cat treats come in all price points. Choose the highest quality your budget will allow, so you know you are doing everything you can to ensure her good health.

Look for a product that lists a high-quality meat in its first few ingredients. Beef, chicken and fish are the most common meat ingredients found in treats. Some manufacturers replace the meat source with some form of corn as the main protein. Cats don't need corn. They need real meat.

I prefer not to feed wheat to my cats. The pet food recalls of 2007 were caused by wheat gluten that had been tainted with melamine, imported from China. I know that pet food manufacturers have taken steps to keep this from occurring again, but I don't believe in taking chances with the lives of my pets. Cats don't need wheat in their diet in any form.

Dry cat treats, or kibble, should be carefully considered before purchasing. Dry cat food often contains questionable ingredients, so read those labels! If you see by-products listed, keep walking. By-products contain the garbage of the pet food industry. They can include meat from diseased animals, feet, brains, blood, and other unmentionables that we don't want our pets to eat. By-products are commonly found in supermarket or discount retailer brands of foods. Shop with care.

Good treats should contain only natural preservatives, flavorings and colors. You don't want your kitty consuming dangerous chemicals that could cause her harm.

Cat food manufacturers are governed by AAFCO (American Association of Feed Control Officials), which determines what goes into the food. The AAFCO seal indicates that a food is nutritionally adequate. However, AAFCO-approved foods do contain very questionable ingredients. Educate yourself and make your own decisions. I have found some very healthy cat treats that do not contain the AAFCO label.



**photo by Bobbi Austin**

## Chapter 2

### Recommendations

There are several types of commercial treats available for cats, and you can make your own. Some are made of dry kibble, flavored to appeal to a cat's senses. These often contain by-products and artificial ingredients, so be sure to read the label before purchasing.

Some cats like to nibble on various types of grasses. Wheat grass is a popular choice and can be grown from seed. Wheat grass has a high concentration of vitamins and antioxidants, which indicates that cats actively gravitate to foods that might help them to maintain good health. Wheat grass has nothing to do with the various forms of wheat used in cheap pet foods.

The problem with grass is that it isn't safe for cats – or any animal – to eat from today's lawns. Too many lawns are treated with chemicals and pesticides that could kill a cat; if you live in Florida as I do nearly ALL lawns are chemically treated. Don't think that your yard is safe because you don't use such things on your grass. If your neighbor has his lawn sprayed with chemicals, the over-spray can easily reach your grass.

Many cats will chew on house plants, and that isn't always a good idea. Be sure to check your collection against a list of poisonous house plants provided by the ASPCA ([aspc.org](http://aspc.org)) and remove any that could harm your kitty. ([www.aspc.org/pet-care/poison-control/animal-poison-control.faq.html](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/poison-control/animal-poison-control.faq.html))

The simplest solution, both to protect your pet and to provide a tasty treat, is to grow your own wheat grass and leave it in an accessible place for your cat. Go to your local pet store and see what they offer for sale. I have purchased kits to grow grass from seed at the pet store. Home-grown grasses are the best choice, because you can be sure they are free of pesticides.

Catnip is another treat of choice. Catnip derives from the mint family and its active ingredient is nepetalactone, an oil found in the leaves of the

plant. You can purchase it in spray bottles, as well as dried. Two of my cats love it. They will eat it, roll in it, talk to it, and play with it. Whatever they do with it provides amusement for humans. Catnip encourages wild behavior in some cats, but others are not affected at all. It is believed that a cat's behavior with catnip is inherited and possibly related to their sexuality. This stems from a scientific study showing the presence of a sexual pheromone found in the urine of male cats that is very similar to nepetalactone found in catnip. (<http://ezinearticles.com/?Why-Cats-Flip-For-Catnip>)

If your cat only plays with the catnip or sniffs it, he may be stimulated by it, but if he actually eats the catnip, you may see a very relaxed kitty. Each cat is different but if she shows a reaction to catnip, it works nicely as a special treat. It is a harmless herb and easy to grow, or you can purchase organic catnip from many sources.



**Photo by Bobbi Austin**

## Chapter 3

### Too Many Treats May Lead to Obesity!

Common sense will tell you that too many treats equals a fat cat, and fat cats lead to a multitude of health issues. If your cat is overweight, avoid treats altogether. Talk to your veterinarian about helping your pet return to a healthier size. (Never put your cat on a diet without a veterinarian's supervision.)

Weight gain can lead to serious conditions such as diabetes, arthritis and heart disease. If you are at all in doubt about your cat's weight, your vet can help. You will want to choose low-calorie treats and provide plenty of exercise for your kitty.





Never feed your cat table scraps. Some can be high in fat and calories and won't provide nutrients that your cat needs. People-food can cause digestive problems in cat that lead to bad breath, vomiting, and diarrhea. Don't risk your kitty's health with people-food.

Sugar treats are a no-no. Treats containing sugar are bad for kitty on several levels. The higher calories associated with sugar pose the obvious weight problem, and sugar leads to dental decay and gum disease. Avoid sugar and protect your cat's teeth. Veterinary dental treatment is expensive and painful for a cat, so prevention is definitely preferred.

There are certain foods that cats should not eat. For instance, onion is toxic to cats, as are mushrooms, canned human tuna, alcoholic beverages, chocolate, caffeine, and garlic. Onions and garlic contain sulfoxides and disulfides which can damage red blood cells. There are many other foods that could be dangerous to your cat, and your veterinarian should be able to help you with a complete list.



## Chapter 5

### When Are the Best Times for Treats?

Play sessions are a great time for treats and encourage your cat to look forward to playing with you. Giving treats reinforces your play. There are interactive cat toys on the market that allow you to hide treats inside them. Your cat will spend hours trying to remove the treats. Look for these toys at any pet store.

Our cats look forward to their bedtime treats. Just a couple of little pieces of dried fish treats make for very happy kitties.

Rewarding a cat for good behavior with a treat is positive reinforcement and teaches a cat that it pays to be good. I am no expert on training cats, but those who claim to be tell me that treat rewards are what make it work.

Cats should not be rewarded for begging, although I'm being a bit hypocritical in saying that. Lucy begs often for treats, and I've been known to give in. It is not a good idea. Certainly you don't want to reward bad behavior, or you will be encouraging a repeat of it.

It is not a good idea to give treats to cats near their regular mealtimes, because they may choose treats over their regular food. Missing meals could lead to dietary deficiencies, if it becomes a habit.



## Chapter 6

### Treats for Sale – Both Good and Not-So-Good

Below are some examples of ingredients of cat food treats you might find in either your supermarket or a better pet store. The “bad” ingredients are highlighted in red. These examples should help you to choose healthy treats for your own kitty. The first 4 ingredients are the key, because ingredients are listed in order of weight, heaviest to lightest.

#### WHISKER LICKEN'S (Nestle Purina)

**Comes in 3 flavors and found in most supermarket and large pet stores.**

**Animal liver flavor, wheat flour, corn gluten meal, water, chicken by-product meal, wheat gluten, animal fat** preserved with mixed tocopherals (form of Vitamin E), glycerin, gelatin, calcium sulfate, phosphoric acid, hydrogenated starch hydrolysate, **salt, soy protein isolate, added color (yellow 5, red 40, blue 2 & other color)**, sorbic acid, citrus fiber, fish oil, calcium propionate, dried cheese powder, **ethoxyquin.**

Notice that 3 of the first 4 ingredients are not healthy choices. Who knows what “animal” liver flavor means, because a specific animal is not mentioned. Wheat flour and corn gluten meal are not good choices. In the first 4 ingredients, there is not a single meat source. The last item on the list is ethoxyquin, a chemical preservative. Cats may love this treat, but it is not a healthy one for them.

#### Zuke's Cat Hip Action Treats This treat is sold in better pet stores.

**Chicken, barley flour, rice flour, vegetable glycerin, malted barley, tapioca, gelatin, water, menhaden fish oil, Brewer's yeast, dextrose, glucosamine hydrochloride, chondroitin sulfate, natural flavors, lecithin, cultured whey, acetic acid (vinegar), salt, Vitamins and minerals: A, D3,**

**E, B12, taurine, ascorbic acid, (Vit.C), calcium pantothenate, riboflavin (B2), niacin, thiamine mononitrate (B1), pyridoxine hydrochloride (B6), folic acid, zinc oxide, sodium selenite (source of selenium).**

You can see that there is nothing objectionable in this variety of Zuke's treats. The company's other flavors have similar ingredients. Best of all, the first ingredient is a named meat source, assuring the buyer that there is high protein content in the treats.



## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

There are many good cat treats on the market, and it would be impossible to mention them all. I particularly like the Zuke's treats and Halo Liv-a-Littles for my cats, because they contain only natural ingredients. There are no chemical preservatives or artificial flavorings to worry about and no unnecessary fillers in these treats. Best of all my cats love them.

In summary, choose cat treats that contain healthy ingredients, such as natural preservatives and flavorings, a high-quality meat source or two in the first four ingredients, and vitamins and minerals.

Avoid treats that substitute forms of corn or other grains for real meat. Don't choose treats that contain by-products and synthetic preservatives and flavorings and colorings.

Feed treats to your cat sparingly to avoid weight issues and decide how you want to use treats – for training, for special times, or for rewards.

Whatever treats you choose for your furry felines, do your homework and make healthy choices for a happier, healthier cat.

