

Make Food Time Fun For Felines

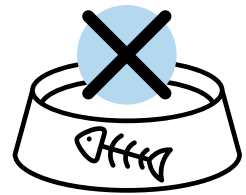


Understanding a cat's natural feeding behaviours

Just like people, cats are healthier when they can exercise their bodies and their brains! Under natural conditions, cats eat little and often and hunt for all their food. This takes up a lot of time and energy – both mental and physical.

Bowls are boring

Cats love to hunt and find it really fun! When we don't feed cats the way they are meant to eat, it can lead to many physical and mental health issues. We usually feed cats from bowls, but this doesn't allow them to use their body and brain to get their food.



How to make food time more fun

There are many ways to encourage a cat to express their natural hunting behaviours during mealtimes. This handout provides advice on how to change your cat over from a bowl or plate to a feeding style that is more fun and better meets their needs as tiny predators that live in your home.

Having said this, there are also times when you might need to feed your cat from a bowl or plate (like when they are sick).



What if I have more than one cat?

The steps we set out below apply to all cats; however, you may notice that just like us, cats have things they like or do not like – both with food and food toys – so try to give each cat what they prefer.

Remember, cats hunt and eat alone, and even those from the same family or who get on really well together prefer to eat alone. This means that you should give each cat their own space to eat.

Before getting started

Say goodbye to free food!

Even though hunting is fun, cats get used to being fed without doing any hard work. This means most cats will need to re-learn how to work for their food. Cats won't be motivated to work for their food if they have unlimited access to it. When we stop "free feeding", we make access to food valuable again. However, changing too much, too fast, can be stressful for your cat, so you will need to do some preparation first:



1. Talk to your vet about your cat's health and discuss the right type and amount of food they need each day.
2. Create a predictable feeding schedule so your cat learns when food will be available. Remember that cats prefer small, frequent meals, rather than one or two big meals. For example, you could give food at 6am, 8am, 5pm, and 9pm (depending on your schedule).
3. Meal prep for your pet. Weigh out your cat's food for each day and store it in a plastic container or a zip-lock bag. You can then divide the portions however you like throughout the day, without accidentally providing too little or too much food.
4. Keep using your cat's bowl during this process. Only one change at a time works best.
5. After a few weeks and when your cat is used to the new meal-time routine, you can start introducing a fun feeding method, like those set out below!

Set your cat up for success

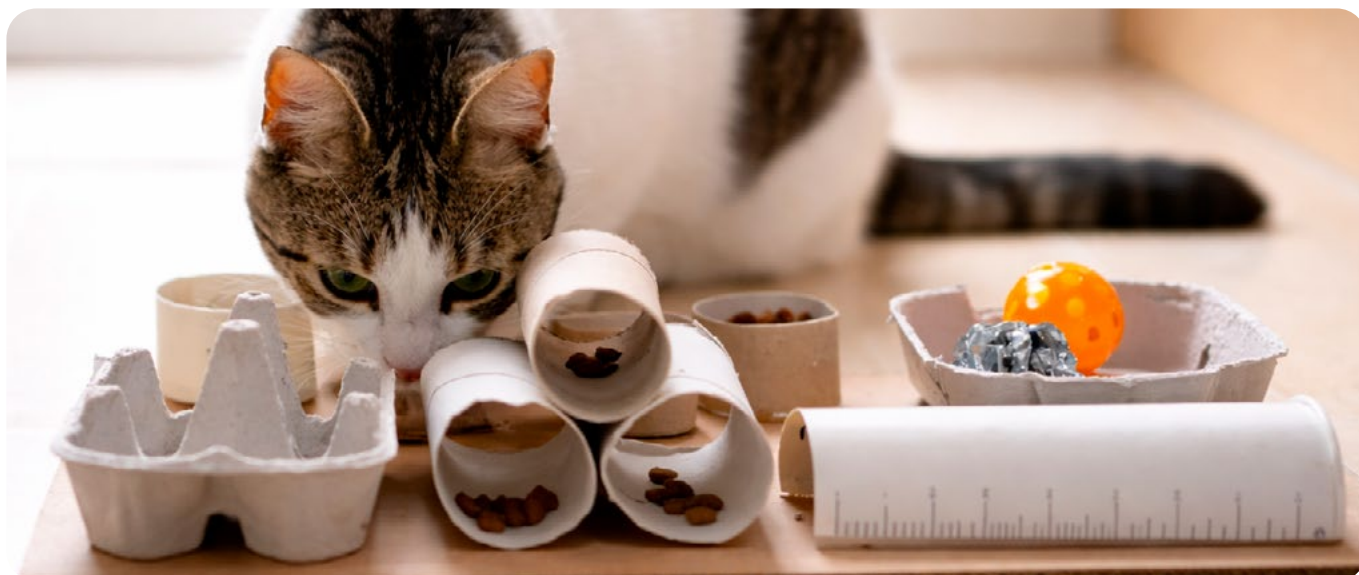
Start with something easy.

Learning new things can be hard and takes time. It can be stressful and frustrating for a cat to know there is food close by, but they can't reach it. So, start any new feeding method slowly and make it easy to start with – build up the difficulty once your cat has mastered the easy puzzle at every feed!



To help your cat learn how to find their food:

1. Choose methods that let your cat easily see, touch, and smell the food, so they know it's worth the effort to work for it.
2. Serve most of your cat's food in their usual bowl and sprinkle a little on or around the new feeding item to encourage them to explore.
3. Gradually make the new item harder for your cat to use.
4. Over time, increase the amount of food in the new feeder while reducing it from the bowl.
5. Try different feeding methods to learn what your cat enjoys most.



Examples of fun and easy homemade feeding toys

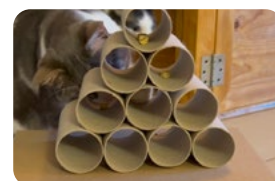
1 Toilet paper roll

- Gently fold the toilet paper roll in half, then cut a triangle from the center of the roll. Fold the ends closed and place dry food within. Start with a bigger hole so it's easy for your cat. The smaller the hole, the more challenging it will be.



2 Toilet paper pyramid

- Collect 10 toilet paper rolls. Place four next to one another to create the base of a pyramid. Then, using sticky tape, place three on top, and so on. Place dry food in several tubes within the pyramid.



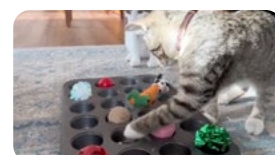
3 Egg carton

- Place an empty egg carton on the ground. Open it and scatter dry food in each section. Your cat will need to use its paw to flick the pieces of food out.



4 Muffin tins

- Scatter dry food in the muffin cups, then place some scrunched-up paper or ping pong balls on top, so your cat must move them to get the food.



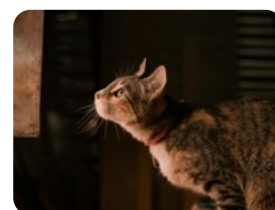
5 Cardboard boxes

- Cut various-shaped holes into shoeboxes, cereal boxes, or any other recyclable items. Place dry food inside. Your cat will need to use its paw to flick the pieces of food out.



6 The treasure hunt

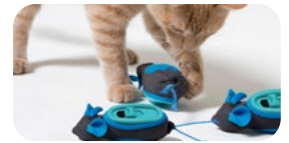
- Place small amounts of dry food into mini craft paper trays and hide them around your home. Start with an easy location, like under the dining table, then scatter them around the home in more difficult places, like on top of scratching posts and partially hidden behind furniture.



Examples of fun feeding devices you can buy

1 Doc & Phoebe's Indoor Hunting Feeder

→ A set of plastic, fabric-covered, mouse-shaped items, designed to be filled with dry food and hidden around the home.



2 Catit Senses 2.0 Food Tree

→ A plastic feeder with holes of different shapes to place dry food into. The size of the holes can be adjusted to different difficulty levels as your cat learns to use it.



3 Trixie Activity Boards

→ Plastic puzzle boards with various sections and compartments to place dry food into.



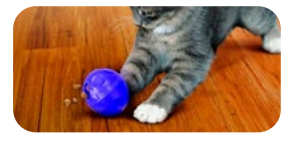
4 Pet snuffle mat

→ Fabric mats with soft folds that allow you to hide dry food within them. You can also make your own DIY Snuffle Mat.



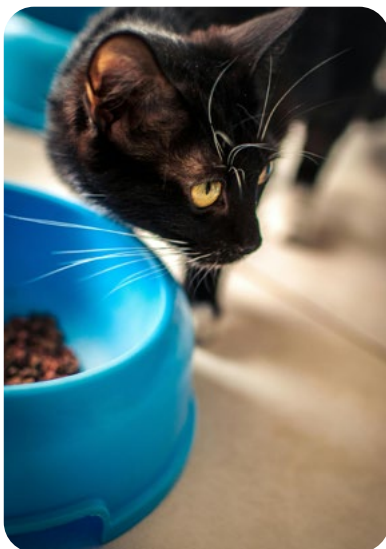
5 KONG Cat Treat Dispensing Ball

→ A plastic ball that dispenses dry food as the cat bats it around.



6 LickiMat

→ Textured mats with various surfaces, designed for spreading wet food. Your cat needs to lick the food from the LickiMat, which takes longer than eating from a bowl or plate.



When the bowl is best

1. If your cat is scared or nervous, making it harder to get food is not recommended. Speak with a vet and/or a feline behaviour consultant to investigate why your cat is scared and make a plan for how to help them.
2. If your cat is sick and this affects their appetite, provide food in a bowl to make it easy for them to eat. See your vet if your cat is unwell or their appetite has changed.
3. If you notice any changes in your cat's appetite after switching them over to a feeding toy, go back to using a regular bowl and consider talking to your vet.

Support



→ This information is only intended as a guide. If you have any questions, please contact RSPCA NSW's free behaviour helpline at mail@rspcansw.org.au.