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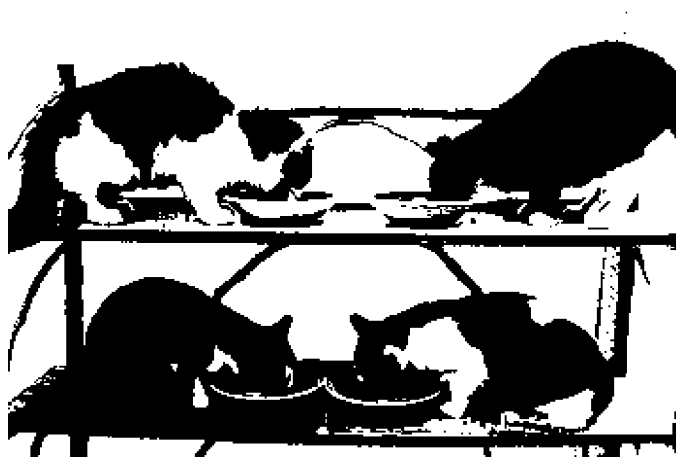
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Clear Your Conscience, Cat Lover By Celeste DiFelici



Celeste's vegan feline family

Many articles have been written about how well dogs fare on a vegan diet (for example, there is a border collie who might go down in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the oldest living dog—currently 27 years old—who eats a vegan diet of rice, lentils and organic vegetables). For those vegans out there, like myself, who struggle with whether or not to feed a vegan diet to their feline companions, put your conscience at ease. Cats can live just as healthy, if not healthier, on a strictly plant-based diet.

Whenever people learn that my four cats are vegan, the same statement always seems to follow: “But that’s not natural!” There’s nothing natural about feeding a cat commercial-brand cat

food. I would even say that a pound of raw meat from the local grocery store is not natural for your cat either since that product is so far removed from what the cat would get if it were a fresh kill.

We all know cats are carnivorous. How, then, is it possible for them to live healthy lives eating a vegan diet? (It should be noted that I am referring to your average domesticated house cat, not an exclusively outdoor feral cat or any of the bigger cats who hunt their own food in the wild.) All that is required is a little supplementation.

The specific nutrient requirements of cats (since they cannot synthesize them on their own) are vitamins A and D, the amino acid taurine and the fatty acid arachidonate. Niacin and thiamin are two important vitamins as well.

The average commercial cat foods contain all of the above, as they are meat-based. But what exactly goes into this food for your furry friend?

- Carcasses of pets (some with flea collars and containing sodium pentobarbital used for euthanasia).
- Diseased livestock, (some still wearing plastic ID tags), riddled with insecticides and pharmaceuticals.
- Rotting (expired) supermarket meat rejects, including plastic and Styrofoam packaging.

Of course, the labels on the cat food won’t outright list the above ingredients. They are simply categorized as by-products. (Slaughterhouse waste is another worry now that mad cow disease has hit the U.S.) Needless to say, that doesn’t sound like a recipe for good health to me.

When I first discovered what “by-products” were, I was appalled and decided I could not continue to feed my cats such an atrocious diet, not to mention my increasing ethical battle with the killing of animals in order to keep my cats alive. In my search for a vegan cat food back in 1991, I stumbled across a vegan pet supplement in some literature I had received from the American Vegan Society.

The supplement was made by a small mom-and-pop company called Harbingers of a New Age (HOANA). James Peden, along with Barbara Lynn, his partner at the time, had done extensive research to learn whether cats could survive on a vegan diet. Luckily, they embarked on their task at a time when researchers had been busy discovering the essential dietary nutrients for cats.

Non-animal sources of necessary vitamins were already available, as well as synthesized taurine. It was the fatty acid arachidonate that slowed them down. After months of research and testing various methods, they finally hit a breakthrough. They contacted Dr. Robert Ackman of the Technical University of Nova Scotia, who analyzed a seaweed (*ascophyllum dodosum*) and discovered it contained enough arachidonate to meet the needs for a supplement.

The product of HOANA's labors is called Vegepet™, and has been approved by the Association of American Feed Control Officials' (AAFCO) Cat Food Nutrient Profile. Vegecat is specifically formulated for felines. A pH balanced formula is available if you have a cat prone to urinary tract infections (very common in male cats, mostly caused by a high ash and magnesium content in major brand cat foods). The risk of the cat's urinary tract forming struvite crystals is virtually eliminated by feeding them the vegan recipes using the pH Vegecat. I experienced this firsthand with Jake who consistently had urinary tract trouble. It wasn't until I converted him to a Vegecat diet that the problem went away completely.

According to HOANA's website: "Harbingers pioneered this cruelty-free way of diet for ethical reasons, but it soon proved to be healthier! Letters and calls poured in from all over the world. People were simply amazed at health improvements that took place in their companion animals' health. Often a veterinarian had warned the caretaker to [detach from] a failing animal, but with the Vegepet diet, health reappeared. We've received reports of animals living an additional 10 years after a vet had given up on them."

Perhaps more convincing than personal stories and anecdotes is observation by a doctor of veterinary medicine. "As a veterinarian concerned with the animal's health, it is very encouraging to observe their health improving in many cases after being on the new regimen [Vegepet]," says Michael Lemmon, DVM.

In every city I've lived in, my vets express time and again how healthy my cats look, from their shiny coats to extremely clean teeth. One vet said she would never have believed the two words "vegetarian" and "healthy" could be used together to describe a cat until my cats proved her wrong.

HOANA is not the only vegan source for cats. Evolution Cat Food is another. Their products are ready-to-eat canned cat food or kibble. Although I prefer to hand-make all my cats' food so it is fresh, there are times when I travel where the Evolution Cat Food comes in handy. They have a gourmet canned food made with avocados that my cats find irresistible.

Transitioning Your Cat to a Vegan Diet

If you start a kitten on a vegan diet, it is unbelievably easy—just put the food in the dish and watch them gobble it up. Switching an older cat who's used to their favorite meat dishes can be a bit more of a hassle.

I've read that one should introduce new foods slowly to get the cat used to the new diet. However, I could not comfortably do this. Vegan food was the only option I gave my cats. One adapted right away—just like my kitten did—even though she'd been eating a healthier version of a meat-based diet for two years. Another refused to eat the soft food, preferring only kibble. Vegepet made that transition easy with a kibble mix. I could bake kibble for my cats and sprinkle digestive enzymes on top to aid their digestion.

My fourth cat, Jake, was another problem altogether. He refused both the soft food and the kibble, having eaten meat-based food for five years by the time I adopted him. He preferred starvation to the new vegan regime. Worried he might lose weight, which he could not afford being a very active cat, I bought free-range chicken eggs from a local farmer and added them to his vegan food. As his taste buds began to change, I slowly stopped giving him egg with his meal and instead, slipped some meat substitutes like Tofurky and other fake meats into the soft food. Finally, it got to a point, about six months later, where he was eating the vegan food by itself. He can't get enough of it now.

Not all cats may adopt a vegan diet easily. Keep working and introducing different vegan foods until you find one the cat favors. Feed that particular food with the Vegepet recipe until your cat's taste buds adjust to the change.

In the wild, the big cats gorge themselves until their bellies are full. They can also go days without food if prey is scarce. On standard diets, domesticated cats aren't supposed to be fed more than twice a day. On a

vegan diet, however, cats get hungry more frequently. I feed my cats about four times a day, and also give them some kibble before bed. This, along with sunshine, exercise and plenty of fresh water has kept my cats in excellent health. They have yet to experience any adverse health problems due to their diet.

Every year, more and more cats become vegan and have excellent health to show for it. So clear your conscience, cat lover! Your feline friend does not have to be your remaining link to the slaughterhouse.

Celeste DiFelici has been a vegan since 1988 and a cat lover her entire life. With a background in nutrition and English, she has worked for earth-minded, educational organizations, like EarthSave, and was recently the publications manager for Bioneers, for which she is currently a contractor. To order *Vegecat™* or read more about HOANA, visit www.vegepet.com. To order *Evolution Cat Food* or learn more about it, go to www.petfoodshop.com.

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