

Raw meat diet may not be enough for cats or tigers

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Animal scientists say a raw meat diet is a good source of protein for cats, but pet owners may need to supplement with other nutrients.

In a new paper in the [Journal of Animal Science](#), researchers from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium analyzed the value of raw meat diets for cats and exotic felids. The researchers used several tests to evaluate the nutrients in meat from bison, cattle, horses and elk.

To test how the different diets affected cats, the researchers collected [blood serum](#) and fecal samples from [domestic cats](#) and captive African wildcats, jaguars and Malayan tigers. The researchers also used cecectomized roosters to analyze amino acid digestibility in the different diets. Cecectomized roosters have had an organ called the cecum removed, which allows scientists to better analyze amino acids in their waste.

They found that raw meat diets met many nutrient requirements for cats, but there were some gaps. None of the diets contained the recommended levels of linoleic acid, the horsemeat did not provide the levels of arachidonic acid recommended for [kittens](#), gestating females and lactating females.

This research is important for animal scientists, zoos and pet owners.

The researchers explain that captive tigers, jaguars and African wildcats

were traditionally fed horsemeat-based raw diets.

"With the closing of horse abattoirs in 2007, the availability of quality grade horsemeat in the United States has decreased, increasing the need for research on the digestibility and composition of possible alternatives," write the researchers.

There is also a growing trend of raw meat diets for domestic housecats. Kelly Swanson, associate professor in animal science at the University of Illinois and coauthor of the study, said the researchers are "a bit wary" of pet owners feeding homemade raw diets. He said pet owners risk exposing cats to increased pathogens and nutrient imbalances.

Pet owners often feed trimmed cuts of meat. These cuts lack fat, which is crucial in feline diets. According to the researchers, if [pet owners](#) feed raw meat diets, they will likely have to supplement it with other nutrients, including appropriate sources of fat and essential fatty acids.

A high-protein diet can also change the types of microbes in the gut. The researchers write that increased protein fermentation in the bowel may lead to more "odiferous" feces, depending on the digestibility of the protein.

Joe Taft, director and founder of The Exotic Feline Rescue Center in Center Point, IN, said he feeds raw meat to the 225 large cats at the center.

"We feed the cats meat with hide and fat and bone still on it," said Taft.

Taft aims to recreate their wild diet, but he also makes changes to keep cats healthy. [Cats](#) with renal problems are given chicken, which is lower in protein. Taft also gives the felines vitamin supplements.

Taft said that though felines will eat "ripe" meat, his staff makes sure their raw meat is as fresh as possible. This caution can reduce the risk of pathogens in the meat.

The researchers recommend future studies on sources of fiber in [raw meat](#) diets. They also recommend studies on the concentration and digestibility of [amino acids](#) in different raw meats.

Provided by American Society of Animal Science

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