

TNR & COLONY CARE

What to Feed Stray and Feral Cats (and What Not To)

What to feed stray and feral cats, how much and how often, the foods to avoid, a simple feeding station, and feeding through winter cold and summer heat.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 24, 2026 • 5 min read • 17 cited sources

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The short answer

Feed stray and feral cats ordinary commercial cat food, dry, canned or both, labeled “complete and balanced”. Put it out once or twice a day at the same time and place, in daylight, and pick up what is left after about 30 minutes. Keep fresh water out. Skip milk, dog food and table scraps.

Cats are obligate carnivores, Cornell’s Feline Health Center explains: they need nutrients found in meat, including taurine, which they cannot make enough of themselves. Cat food supplies it; VCA notes that dog food does not contain enough.

What to feed, at a glance

FOODS FOR OUTDOOR CATS: YES AND NO

Food	Feed it?	Why
Dry cat food	Yes	Complete nutrition at a price a caretaker can keep up, and it does not freeze. Neighborhood Cats suggests a good-quality dry food, with wet when you can.
Canned (wet) cat food	Yes	At least 75% water, so it helps cats drink enough. Pick it up before it spoils or freezes.
Kitten food	For kittens, pregnant and nursing cats	More energy for growing and for making milk.

Food	Feed it?	Why
Fresh water	Always	Every day, in a clean bowl, more often when it freezes.
Cow's milk and dairy	No	Many cats are lactose-intolerant, and milk can upset their stomachs.
Dog food	Not as a diet	It does not contain enough taurine for a cat.
Onions, garlic, chives	No	They can damage red blood cells, and cats are more sensitive to them than dogs.
Chocolate, coffee, alcohol, xylitol	No	On the ASPCA's list of people foods to keep away from pets.
Raw meat, raw eggs, bones	No	Raw food can carry bacteria such as Salmonella and E. coli; bones can injure or block the gut.
Tuna for people	Only as a treat or trap bait	Not a complete diet, and too much fish brings too much mercury.

From the ASPCA, Cornell Feline Health Center, VCA, Tufts and Neighborhood Cats.

How much to feed

Start with the feeding guide on the food's label, then adjust to the cats. For a colony, Humane World for Animals estimates about $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of dry food per cat a day. If every bowl is empty within minutes and the cats look thin, Alley Cat Allies suggests putting out a bit more; if food is still there after 30 minutes, put out less.

A feeding routine

- Same time, same place, every day, in daylight. Feeding by day keeps raccoons, skunks and other night animals from finding the food.
- Pick up leftovers within 30 minutes, as Alley Cat Allies and Humane World for Animals advise. Food left out draws insects and wildlife.
- Use clean bowls, and keep fresh water out at all times.
- Watch the cats while they eat: a regular meal is when you can count them and spot a newcomer, a limp or a cat that looks sick.
- Keep the area tidy, with no piles of food or empty cans. It keeps neighbors on your side.

A simple feeding station

A feeding station keeps rain and snow out of the food and gives the cats a set place to eat. Alley Cat Allies makes one from a large plastic tub, about 30 gallons, turned on its side with an entrance cut in it and set on a slight slope so rain drains out the front.

Put it somewhere quiet and out of sight, away from foot traffic, noise and busy roads, and ask the property owner first. Where raccoons and opossums raid the food, Humane World for Animals describes a station raised on a post at least 6 feet high. Setting the bowl in a shallow dish of water keeps ants away. Put food near the cats' shelter but never inside it: our [winter shelter guide](#) shows a covered station made from two shelters and a board.

Feeding in winter and summer

- Winter: cats need extra calories to stay warm. Humane World for Animals says they eat about 15% more in cold weather.
- Wet food takes the least energy to digest, so warm it before serving, but it can freeze overnight. When it would freeze before the cats finish it, feed dry food.
- Winter water: use deep, dark plastic bowls rather than metal, refresh water once or twice a day, or use a heated pet bowl. More ideas in [how to keep outdoor cats warm in winter](#).
- Before a snowstorm: leave enough food and water to last more than a day.
- Summer: bugs find wet food within about 30 minutes, so pick it up promptly. Keep water in the shade, in deep, narrow bowls that dry out more slowly.

Kittens, pregnant and nursing cats

Kittens need kitten food until they are about a year old, the ASPCA says. The Merck Veterinary Manual advises kitten food for a mother cat while she is pregnant and nursing, too: a nursing mother can need two to three times her usual amount. Put plenty of food and water near her nest.

Kittens on their own need more than food. See [found kittens: what to do first](#) and the [kitten feeding chart by age](#).

Feeding is half the job: TNR

Feeding keeps cats alive, but on its own it does not stop litters. Humane World for Animals asks caretakers to make sure the cats they feed are spayed or neutered and vaccinated, through trap-neuter-return (TNR). The schedule you already keep helps: as Neighborhood Cats notes, feeding patterns make trapping easier. See [how to trap a feral cat](#) and [what TNR is](#).

Some towns have rules about feeding outdoor animals. Ask your town or city clerk; for New York, see [TNR and cat feeding laws in New York](#).

Feeding a colony in Cattaraugus County? We help caretakers with spay/neuter costs and lend humane traps. [Apply for help.](#)

Quick answers

What is the best food for stray cats?

Commercial cat food labeled complete and balanced. Dry food is affordable and does not freeze; canned food adds water. Many caretakers feed dry, with wet when they can.

Can I give a stray cat milk?

No. Many cats are lactose-intolerant, and milk can upset their stomachs. Give fresh water instead.

Can stray cats eat dog food?

Not as a regular diet. VCA notes that dog food does not contain enough taurine, which cats need for a healthy heart.

How often should I feed a feral cat?

Once or twice a day, at the same time and place, in daylight, picking up what is left after about 30 minutes.

Is it OK to feed stray cats tuna?

Only now and then, or as trap bait. VCA says tuna lacks nutrients cats need, and Tufts warns that a cat gets far more mercury from it, for its size, than a person does.

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