FOOD & PLANTS

Can Cats Eat Tuna? How Much, How Often, and Which Kind

Yes, now and then: about a tablespoon of plain tuna, once a week at most. Tuna packed for people is not a complete diet for a cat, and too much of it brings mercury.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 28, 2026 • 5 min read • 7 cited sources

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The short answer

Yes, as an occasional treat. PetMD's veterinarian puts the limit at about 1 tablespoon of plain tuna, once a week: canned in water with nothing added, or fresh tuna cooked plain.

Tuna packed for people is not a complete diet for a cat. VCA notes that it lacks nutrients cats need, has too much unsaturated fat and no added vitamin E, and that just a few ounces hold more than a third of the day's calories for many cats. VCA's own advice is to skip it, even as a treat.

Mercury is the other reason to keep it small. Cailin Heinze, a veterinary nutritionist at Tufts University, explains that a cat eating tuna as its main food takes in far more mercury for its body weight than a person does, even a person who eats a lot of tuna.

Tuna at a glance

TUNA FOR CATS, KIND BY KIND

Tuna	For a cat?	Why
Chunk light tuna canned in water, nothing added	Yes, as a small treat	The kind Tufts suggests: far less mercury than albacore
Fresh tuna, cooked plain	Yes, as a small treat	Cooked through with no butter, oil or spices, cooled and cut small (PetMD)

Tuna	For a cat?	Why
Albacore (“white”) tuna	Better not	From a larger species, with almost three times the mercury of chunk light (Tufts)
Tuna canned in oil	Better not	PetMD advises tuna packed in water, not oil
Tuna with spices or flavors	No	Keep it plain (PetMD): onion and garlic damage a cat’s red blood cells (ASPCA)
Tuna salad and sandwich fillings	No	Often made with onion, which damages a cat’s red blood cells (ASPCA)
Raw tuna, sushi or sashimi	No	Cook fresh tuna through (PetMD): raw meat can carry bacteria such as Salmonella (ASPCA)
Cat food with tuna, labeled “complete and balanced”	Yes, but not every day	Balanced for cats (PetMD); Tufts suggests rotating to lower-mercury fish such as salmon

Treats of every kind, tuna included, should stay under about 10% of what your cat eats in a day (AAHA).

Why tuna can’t be a meal

Cats are obligate carnivores: Cornell’s Feline Health Center explains that they need nutrients found in meat. Cat food labeled “complete and balanced” provides all of them, the FDA explains. A can of tuna packed for people was never made to.

Plain tuna is rich in unsaturated fat and short on vitamin E (VCA, PetMD). When a cat eats a lot of it, PetMD warns, the imbalance can cause steatitis, an inflammation of body fat, and myopathy, an inflammation of the muscles.

Tuna is also rich enough in calories to put weight on a cat quickly, and some cats are allergic to fish (PetMD). Cats are drawn to its smell and taste and will overeat it given the chance, PetMD adds, and Tufts notes that cats tend to be very particular about which foods they will eat, which can make a tuna habit hard to break.

This quick sheet is the start of the guide. Still to read: Tuna and mercury, How to give tuna as a treat, Other treats to try instead and 3 more sections, plus the What Cats Can & Can’t Eat Chart. Read it all free when you join our pet health emails at cattcountycatnippers.org/articles/can-cats-eat-tuna

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