



Caregiver Tips: Food and Water

This information has been provided by [Alley Cat Allies](#).

Provide adequate food and water for the cats on a regular basis, year-round. Feed during daylight hours for your safety and so that you can easily assess the members of the colony.

1. Food: Nutrition and Seasonal Considerations

The amount of food a cat needs depends on her size, the weather, and what other food sources are available. Expect an adult feral cat to eat roughly 5.5 ounces of wet (canned) cat food and 2 ounces of dry food daily (increase to a half cup if only feeding dry). Cats vary in their needs, so some will eat considerably more food, others less.

While gauging how much to leave, observe the cats and use your discretion based on the time it takes for the food to be eaten. If the cats eat all of the food in 15 minutes or less, consider putting out a bit more. If there is consistently food remaining after a half hour, put out a bit less. Although most cats clearly enjoy canned food, feeding a colony dry food alone is fine as well. It is less expensive and just as nutritious.

In the winter, especially in colder locations, expect the colony to consume more food because they will need extra calories to maintain energy levels. In places where wet food may freeze, it is advisable to just feed dry food. If you know the colony will eat right away, and you plan to feed canned food, consider warming the food prior to arriving at the site and using insulated bags to keep the food warm during travel.

Remove uneaten food within 30 minutes. Never allow food to sit out, as it may attract insects or wildlife.

Do not expect all of the cats to eat at the same time or worry that some may not be getting their share. Within a colony, cats with seniority or stronger personalities may eat before those who are lower on the social scale. Those who eat first leave food for the others. Do not be concerned about or try to manage this social interaction. It is perfectly normal.

Keep the feeding location neat and clean, for the health of the cats and for the community. Keep the food dishes in one place to facilitate cleanup and to provide a tidy appearance, and again, remove feeding dishes within 30 minutes.

2. Water

Outdoor cats need clean water daily and during all conditions.

Here are tips to keep the water from freezing in the winter months:

1. Use heated water bowls (if near an electrical outlet).
2. Keep the water in the sun and use dark colored bowls that will absorb the sun's heat.
3. Use wider and deeper bowls.

4. Insulate the bowls.
5. Use double-layered bowls—they have an insulated air layer between the surface the water touches and the surface against the ground.
6. Place the water dish inside a small styrofoam cooler to slow the freezing.
7. Use microwavable disks called Snuggle Safe Disc under the water bowl.
8. Surround the top and sides of the feeding area with plexiglass to create a greenhouse environment for the water.
9. If there is a water source like a spigot, run the water slightly, since it won't freeze as quickly as still water.
10. Shield the bowl from wind.

If you notice that the cats are not using the water you provide, try moving it a short distance away from their food. Cats sometimes prefer this arrangement.

3. Feeding Locations and Stations

Overview

Though it is not a requirement, building a feeding station and establishing a specific area for feeding can help camouflage where the cats eat and make colony management easier on the caregiver. The goal is for this area to not be visible to the public. Feeding stations help deter insects from the food by raising it off of the ground; having a roof protects the food from the elements. It also helps with Trap-Neuter-Return efforts, since cats are fed at the same place every day making it easy to know where to trap. Also, you can gradually and easily move the feeding stations when needed to address neighborhood concerns. In colder climates, feeding cats at a regular time and place ensures that the cats know when and where to go to be fed.

Assembly

You can find a sheltered spot or build a canopy to cover the food. See examples and ideas for feeding stations below. Suitable feeding stations can easily be fashioned by someone with basic carpentry skills or with household items. It is important to camouflage the feeding station as much as possible. One way to do this is to paint the shelters with dark green or brown paint.

Examples:

- [Alley Cat Allies Feeding Station](#)
- For a simple, protected feeding station, try attaching a domed plastic garbage can lid to three or four wooden posts.
- Cut cat-size holes in large plastic tubs or trash cans.



Location

Location of the feeding stations is also important. Food should be situated away from high traffic areas and not too close to the cats' shelters, where they sleep, or the place where they eliminate. Some caregivers create a feeding station in their garage, shed, or car port if the colony is behind or near their home. When colonies live in a workplace environment or campus, caregivers sometimes work with maintenance or grounds departments, so that cats can be fed in outbuildings, which aids in reducing visibility to colony feeding areas.

4. Cleanliness

It may be obvious that a cluttered area with debris will call undue attention, but it is worth stating here to emphasize its importance. Besides any empty food containers you use for the cats, there may be other garbage and trash. Removing all of this daily or weekly will help make the feeding station sanitary and unobtrusive. Many caregivers realize that it is important to pick up the trash in the area, even garbage they did not create. This helps avoid possible health code violations and maintain positive relations with the local residents.

5. Deterring Insects

In addition to raising the food off the ground, other ways to deter insects from cat food include the following:

- [Alley Cat Allies' list of tried and true ant proof bowls for food and water for your feral cat colony.](#)
- Surround the food bowl with a ring of baking soda.
- Place a tray or flowerpot tray with about half an inch to an inch of water in it on the feeding station platform and then place the food bowl on the tray.
- Keep your feeding areas clean, especially in hot, humid weather and always remove feeding dishes within 30 minutes.
- Cut back, or completely cut out, the amount of wet food that you feed, because dry food tends to attract fewer bugs. Be sure to add more dry food to compensate.
- Elevate feeding stations slightly off the ground and surround them with a line of food-grade diatomaceous earth without chemical additives (available from some natural food stores and environmentally conscious pet-care supply companies). The diatom dust should be reapplied after rainstorms. Note that diatomaceous earth sold for swimming pool filters is not safe to use for this purpose.

6. Resources for Obtaining Food

There are many avenues of support for caregivers to find affordable or free food:

- Check for surplus food at your local humane society or human food bank.
- Ask your local market or pet supply store to donate broken packages or dented cans. Some retailers will also donate out-of-date products, which are still good for a few months longer than the sell-by date.
- Ask local vet clinics if they have surplus or just-out-of-date premium pet foods that they are willing to donate.
- Announce a cat food drive in the local paper to collect donations from the public. Your place of business, local religious institutions, and civic or youth groups may be willing to help with the cat food drive as well.
- Ask local markets and pet supply shops if you may put out an attractive bin requesting cat food donations.