

What Do Mammals Eat?

Mammals are a diverse group of animals that live in every suitable spot on earth as well as some we humans consider unsuitable. As part of their adaptation to their environment, different species of mammals prefer to eat only certain foods or a narrow range of food types. If there isn't a sufficient supply of their food, mammals will starve because they eat only the foods they are adapted to. No, you as a human mammal cannot go home and refuse to eat what your parents fix for meals saying you are not adapted to that food!



Mammals are classified into four categories based upon their diet. The four categories are: herbivores, carnivores, insectivores and omnivores. Herbivores are animals that eat only plants or parts of plants like the leaves. While it's easy to understand that hoofed animals like cows, deer, antelope, bison, wildebeest, zebras and giraffes are herbivores, smaller animals like koala bears and the sloths of the rainforest are also herbivores because they eat only the leaves of the trees that they inhabit. The koala bear only eats the leaves of the eucalyptus tree. The giant panda of China is one bear that is an herbivore because it only eats bamboo shoots.

Carnivores are flesh-eating mammals and flesh includes the meat of other animals as well as fish and birds. Carnivores are the predators and herbivores are the prey. Predators and prey live together. Carnivores need the herbivores as a food supply and herbivores need carnivores to keep the herd healthy because predators will be able to catch animals that are weak.

Instead of killing and eating prey some carnivores are willing to eat animals that are already dead, called carrion. While we usually think of birds like vultures as the ones who eat carrion, some North American mammals that eat carrion include the coyote, fox, raccoon, skunk and opossum.

Of the over 5,000 mammal species about 450 are insectivores, meaning their diet is solely composed of insects. Insectivores are adapted to their diet and generally have small sharp teeth. In fact insectivores themselves tend to be small animals like moles, shrews, and hedgehogs.

The remaining animals are omnivores, meaning "to eat all." Humans are omnivores that need to eat a balanced diet of fruit, vegetables, grains and meat.