

HOT TOPIC

Feeding the finicky feline



In focus

Encouraging picky cats to eat can be frustrating for veterinary health care providers and pet owners alike.

Managing medical conditions and stress and implementing strategies to improve food intake can help finicky felines meet their energy and nutrient needs. These strategies apply to hospitalized cats and cats in a home environment.

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Medical management of inappetence

Food intake should be tracked in the hospital by veterinary health care providers and at home by pet owners. If energy requirements are not met, the cat should be evaluated for medical causes of anorexia or hyporexia. If the underlying cause of inappetence is known, it should be addressed. However, inappetence can be a vague sign without known causes. In these cases, concurrent clinical signs should be managed.¹

These include:

- Nausea
- Pain
- Gastrointestinal dysmotility

If medical management of associated clinical signs is not sufficient to initiate food intake, behavioral strategies should be implemented.

Behavioral strategies to improve food intake

Reducing stressors may also improve food intake.² Often, it is necessary to use a complete and balanced highly palatable, highly digestible, energy dense diet that will not be used long term and that is not a favorite food of the cat when the cat is not feeling well or is stressed. Avoid introducing a therapeutic or new diet until a food aversion is unlikely – after a significant stressor has been removed or the pet is discharged from the hospital. This includes urinary and renal diets.

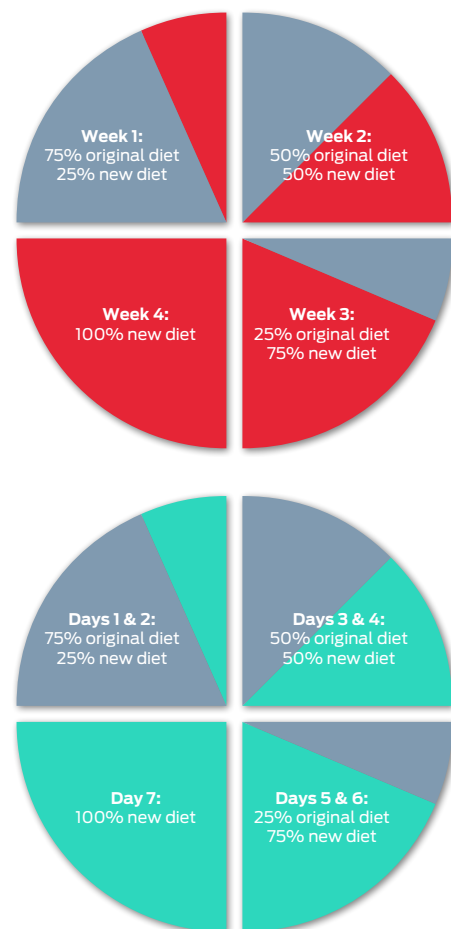
Other behavioral strategies that may increase food intake include:

- For hospitalized cats, have the owner bring something from home that smells familiar to comfort the cat.
 - If the cat needs to consume a new diet long term, transition the cat to the diet in a comfortable home setting. Some cats will need a slower transition, e.g., 4 weeks, while others may accept the new diet more readily, allowing for a faster transition. For long-term diet changes, it is not recommended to transition cats more quickly than over seven days.
 - Offer more than one bowl of food (even with the same food).
 - Have a set endpoint to mealtimes to prevent constant exposure to food odors.
 - Offer a variety of foods and new foods, when possible, to help increase appetite. This includes different forms and types of food. This strategy can be successful in a positive environment.
 - Add something flavorful to a therapeutic diet such as a small amount of acceptable and palatable food, palatable probiotics, flavored hydration supplements, or dry cat treats.
 - Be mindful of unbalanced calories and/or contraindicated nutrients from treats, human foods, or other sources.
 - Offer social time with petting or grooming before offering food, if rewarding to the cat.
 - If rewarding to the cat, have the owner or a well-liked veterinary team member present but not hovering.
 - In a home setting, the cat can eat when and where the owner is eating.
- Try different bowl types or a flat plate. Always use a bowl or plate that is easily cleaned and does not retain odors.
 - Control for food freshness by storing food in airtight packaging.
 - Feed smaller meals more frequently, especially with wet food.
 - Gently warm food or bring food to room temperature.

Next steps

When these strategies do not work, veterinary health care teams can consider utilizing an appetite stimulant or feeding tube to help meet the cat's energy and nutrient requirements. Feeding tubes can help avoid the issue of food aversion and can be used to deliver an appropriate diet and hydration.

Example slower diet transition plan versus faster diet transition for cats. Adapted from Quimby 2023.³



References

1. Odunayo, A. (2023). Practical tool: Assisted feeding and using feeding tubes in canine and feline practice. In C. Lenox, R. J. Corbee, & A. Sparkes (Eds.), *Purina Institute Handbook of Canine and Feline Clinical Nutrition* (2nd ed.). Embark Consulting Group.
2. Taylor, S., Chan, D. L., Villaverde, C., Ryan, L., Peron, F., Quimby, J., O'Brien, C., & Chalhoub, S. (2022). 2022 ISFM Consensus guidelines on management of the inappetent hospitalised cat. *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery*, 24(7), 614-640. doi: 10.1177/1098612X221106353
3. Quimby, J. (2023). Chronic kidney disease in cats. In C. Lenox, R. J. Corbee, & A. Sparkes (Eds.), *Purina Institute Handbook of Canine and Feline Clinical Nutrition* (2nd ed.). Embark Consulting Group.