

Successfully transitioning a cat to a new therapeutic diet  
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For many illnesses, dietary management forms a pivotal component of the treatment plan. Whether needed short or long-term, achieving compliance to the new diet can be very challenging for carers. Cats are renowned for their discerning nature and may be reluctant to change to a new food that looks, smells, tastes and feels different to them. Transition should be handled carefully to avoid complications such as vomiting or diarrhoea associated with a rapid diet change. Long-term acceptance is enhanced by a gradual transition period.

In general, the transition to a new diet should take place over no fewer than 5-7 days. One exception to this is when an immediate change in diet is recommended, for example a cat suffering from an acute gastroenteritis. In many situations, successful transition to a new diet can take several weeks or even months to achieve. Transitioning to a new long-term diet should only be done when the patient is clinically well, ideally not in the vet hospital. For cats with significant illness (eg chronic kidney disease), all measures should be taken to address issues which may affect appetite. For example, complications such as hypokalaemia, nausea, dehydration, anaemia, pyrexia, pain and metabolic acidosis should be corrected before attempting to transition to a new food. If appetite is poor, appetite stimulants such as mirtazapine (eg 1-2 mg every 48 hours) can be considered.

Most clinicians advocate the following as a template for food transition:

- Days 1 and 2: offer a small amount of the new food (no more than 20% of the cat's daily allowance), preferably in a separate bowl to the old food. Offer less of the old food eg 80% of normal amount.
- Days 3 and 4: increase the amount of new food offered whilst decreasing the amount of old food available eg 40% new food, 60% old food
- Days 5 and 6: continue to increase the amount of new food offered whilst decreasing the amount of old food available eg 60% new food, 40% old food
- Day 7: feed only the new food

Whilst most clinicians would recommend that the new and old food are offered in separate bowls, placed next to each other, for some cats mixing the old and new food or having them alongside each other on the same saucer can be more successful. The amount of new food should only be increased if accepted and tolerated by the cat. If gastrointestinal upsets are seen then the rate of transition should be slowed down or transition abandoned in the short-term.

Many cats, especially those with chronic illnesses, resist transition. Some cats, especially the elderly, are very 'set in their ways' and may resist a change in their food. If possible, the ideal 'new' diet is similar in formulation as this is more likely to encourage acceptance. For example, a change from Hill's Science Plan to Hill's k/d is likely to be more straightforward than a change from a supermarket commercial cat food to a therapeutic diet. It is always more important that the cat eats *some* food than *no* food so carers should expect some day to day variation in acceptance of the new food and be prepared to 'go backwards' in terms of what they offer their cat (ie back-off the new food and offer more of the cat's previous

diet). The transition should be viewed as a long-term goal which may take months to achieve in their cat.

Transitioning from a dry formulation to a wet food can be indicated in some circumstances and may present additional challenges. Sprinkling dry food on top of the wet and/or mixing into the wet food can help to encourage some cats to try the new wet food. Grinding the dry food up and mixing it with the new wet food may help. For cats used to eating ad lib, changing to 3-4 meals per day can encourage transition by allowing the cat to develop a hunger in between meals.

Multicat households provide a challenge in terms of access to other foods. Microchip controlled food bowls (eg Surefeed) may be worth considering if it is difficult to ensure that each cat receives only its intended food.

Throughout the transition period, weight and general progress should be monitored to ensure that success is being critically assessed and helped, as needed. This is especially relevant to those cats transitioning to a new long-term diet.

Additional tips to encourage eating can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. General tips for encouraging appetite for a new diet

<b><i>Tactic</i></b>	<b><i>Comment</i></b>
Provide a cat friendly environment	Cats prefer to eat in a calm and quiet location. Feliway (Ceva Animal Health) diffusers can be helpful in providing a sense of calm reassurance.
Offer fresh food, remove it after 30 minutes if uneaten	Prolonged exposure to the sight and aroma of unappealing food is off-putting and may contribute towards causing a food aversion.
Use wide, shallow bowls or saucers to offer the food	Cats dislike their whiskers touching the sides of bowls when eating or drinking
Avoid plastic bowls for food and water	Most cats prefer to eat and drink out of glass, ceramic or stainless steel bowls
Consider the location of the bowl	Food and water bowls should not be close together; both bowls should be away from the litter box and 'busy' areas of the home
Consider raising the food bowl	Many elderly cats have osteoarthritis affecting their neck and elbows which can make crouching to eat uncomfortable
Offer multiple small meals per day – for example a fresh meal every two hours	Most cats prefer to eat little and often
Avoid dosing with medication at or close to mealtimes	Negative stimuli associated with mealtimes can trigger a food aversion. If

	possible have a different person medicating to the person offering food.
Wipe away any oral, nasal and ocular discharges and groom the cat	Removing nasal discharges helps to improve the sense of smell which may also benefit appetite.
Warm the food slightly	The ideal temperature is just below body temperature. Room temperature is preferable to fridge temperature!
Consider adding some water to the food	Mashing wet food with some water can improve palatability.
Hand-feeding	Offering the food by hand whilst sitting with the cat often improves compliance. Placing a small amount of food on the lips often triggers a licking response. Alternatively, a small amount of food can be placed onto a paw from where it can be groomed off.
Catnip?	In cats that respond to catnip, this can act as an appetite stimulant when sprinkled onto the food.
Fortiflora?	The probiotic Fortiflora may help encourage appetite in some cats. Use according to the pack instructions.