

Switching to a New Diet

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Many pets experience problems when we try to change their diet. And diet change is one of the most important things we can do to bolster our pets' health. So how can we minimize the chance of problems?

First and foremost, go slowly. A diet change may require as little as 3-5 days, or as long as 1-2 months, depending upon the situation. Remember, a diet change is typically a long-term lifestyle change, so often we can take the time to ease into things. Try mixing about 4/5 of the old diet with 1/5 of the new diet. Over the next few days or weeks (depending upon the sensitivity of your pet or his/her reluctance to eat something new), gradually add more of the new food and less of the old. If you encounter problems at any stage, simply go back one step to a mixture that the pet was tolerating and start again when things are more stable.

Cats can present a special challenge, as they are often finicky about new things. DO NOT try a sudden change with a finicky cat! Go slowly, and mix the foods together, starting with such a small amount of new food that they don't notice the difference. Then, gradually, ever so slowly, add in imperceptibly more new food over several weeks. Try to make sure they are hungry when you offer them food; if you leave dry food out all the time, or if they have access to other pets' food, they may not have incentive to try something new. On the other hand, do not starve a cat thinking: "They will eventually eat if they are hungry enough". Cats have a habit of either starving themselves (truly!) or developing hepatic lipidosis (a deadly liver condition). Overweight cats are actually more prone to problems than others! A general guideline: Do not allow a cat to go without eating (for any reason) for more than 3-4 days without contacting your veterinarian.

Occasionally we will get "detox" reactions from upgrading the diet. These can occur a few months after switching the diet. Reactions might include "blowing" the coat, skin eruptions, goopy eyes, or diarrhea. These can be a good sign, as the body is ridding itself of toxins (sometimes many years' worth!). If signs are mild, stick with it. If signs cause concern, discuss it with your veterinarian.