

Little Big Cat

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SWITCHING YOUR CAT'S DIET

By Jean Hofve, DVM

Many cat guardians have tried—and failed—to switch their cat to a better diet. A primary reason for that is the tendency of cats to turn their noses up at any new food.

To a large extent, your cat's food preferences were formed during kittenhood. In fact, many cats that have been fed only dry food their whole lives simply don't recognize anything else as "food." Getting a food-addicted cat just to change brands or flavors can be a major challenge. Cats dislike change in general, and messing with their dinner habits may not be welcome. But it is almost always possible to convert cats to a better diet.

For cats who have dry food available 24/7 ("free choice"), the first step is a timed meal schedule: leave the food out for 30-60 minutes in the morning and evening, but put it away the rest of the time. Your cat will not starve to death in 12 hours. The eat-fast-eat schedule is more natural to carnivores, and gives their tummies time to rest between meals. Don't restrict the amount; put out plenty of food. The big advantage of timed meals is that the cat will be *hungry* at mealtime, and thus more willing to try new things.

When you make the transition from one food to another, plan ahead. Don't run completely out of one food and just slap down a bowl of something new. Even if the cat will eat it, the sudden switch can cause tummy upset.

If adding raw food, or switching from dry to canned or raw, use caution and go slowly. These forms of food are so vastly different that it will take some serious getting used to on the part of your cat's tummy. In the case of dry food, it may be easier to switch to canned food first, and then move to raw later if you desire. Just getting a dry-food addict to eat a good quality canned food is a worthwhile improvement!

To start, for the first few days, feed 75 percent old food mixed with 25 percent new food; then 50 percent each of old and new food for a few days; then 25 percent old food and 75 percent new food; and finally all new food. This staged approach helps the cat's gut bacteria gear up to handle the new food properly. Some cats require an even more gradual approach. For instance, on the first day you might mix only 5% new food with the old food, and go up in 5% increments every few days over several weeks.

If your cat refuses to touch dry food with canned or raw mixed in (remembering that when dry food gets wet, surface bacteria will rapidly grow; discard leftovers not eaten within the meal period), offer only the new food for the first half of the meal period. Many cats will be hungry enough to at least taste it. If not, try these tricks:

- Start with plain meat, without veggies or supplements.
- Lightly brown the meat.
- Sprinkle a handful of kibbles on top of the canned or raw food.
- Crush the dry food into crumbs. Make *tiny*, bite-sized meatballs of the new food, and roll them in the crumbs

Make sure your cat is eating at least a little at each meal. If not, take a step backwards in terms of percentages, or offer your cat's favorite food by itself. Cats (especially overweight cats) can get into big trouble if they miss even a few meals—they can quickly develop hepatic lipidosis (fatty liver disease). It is expensive to treat, and not all cats survive.

For the first two weeks after completing the changeover to the new food, closely monitor your cat's appetite, stool quality and energy level, and be alert for unusual symptoms—itchiness, runny eyes, diarrhea—that could be telling you the food is not right for him.

Now, many (if not most) cats *will* have a change in stool, even diarrhea. As long as the cat is still eating well and acting fine, diarrhea is nothing to worry about; in fact, it's pretty normal, and will often persist for a week or two. (CAUTION: If your cat has additional symptoms, such as lethargy, poor appetite, or persistent vomiting, stop the new food and contact your veterinarian; there may be something else going on.) There are several ways to prevent or resolve diarrhea due to diet change:

- Make the switch *very* slowly; or decrease the amount of new food being fed and go back to a larger proportion of the old food.
- Add a digestive enzyme supplement. You can get one made for pets, or use a human version from the health food store. Enzymes should be plant-based (not pancreas extracts) and include protease, lipase, amylase, and cellulase.
- Add probiotics to help balance the gut's bacterial population. Probiotics are “friendly” bacteria such as *Lactic acidophilus* and *Bifidobacterium bifidum*.

Variety is critically important in your cat's diet. As tempting as it is to stick with one recipe or flavor that your cat prefers, be sure to mix it up with different meats and veggies. This ensures that your cat is getting a good balance of nutrients, vitamins, and minerals.

Your cat's skin and coat quality, energy and activity level, and appetite are the best indicators of whether the food is compatible with his system and providing ample nutrition.

Little Big Cat provides telephone consultations for cat behavior and health problems. For more information, go to www.LittleBigCat.com or call Jean Hofve, DVM at **720-938-6794**.

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