

My Cat Won't Eat!

Every cat owner has, at one time or another, had to deal with the frustrating problem of their cat refusing to eat or being 'picky'.

Why? There may be a medical reason: Nausea (drooling, grinding teeth, seeming interested, smelling, then walking away), dehydration (dry, tacky gums and extremely thick saliva), pain (mouth, arthritis, dental, intestinal etc.), metabolic disease such as kidney insufficiency, infections, and more. Even a sudden change to a new cat food can cause stomach upset and reduce appetite. Your veterinarian can work with you to find and treat the reason. In the meantime, there are some things you can do at home.



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Did you know? "If they get hungry enough, they'll eat" does NOT apply to cats. A cat will literally die before it eats a food it doesn't like. And if it doesn't eat at all for 3-5 days, it can develop a potentially fatal disease called hepatic lipidosis, or "fatty liver". So, it's important to understand what a cat needs and wants to eat. Cats are obligate carnivores: they must eat meat. They have very little use for carbohydrates and cannot even taste sweet. Your veterinarian can tell you how many calories your cat should eat in a day, but in general, an average 10 lb cat needs 200-250 calories. You can find the calorie content (listed as Kcal) on the food can or bag. Cats also need around a cup of water per day.



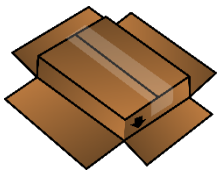
Cats like foods that resemble fresh prey: high protein, moist, warm, and with a high-water content. They won't eat anything that resembles carrion: cold and bitter tasting items are really off putting. It is critical that you warm the food up before offering. Note that it takes less than 10 seconds in the microwave to heat up canned food: stir it with your finger to eliminate any hot spots and to make sure it isn't too hot. Feed many small meals to keep the food fresh and eliminate waste.



Some cats prefer privacy, while others will eat more with company and petting. Cats prefer a routine and consistency of care. (Who amongst us hasn't tried to sleep in only to have our furry friend right in our face begging at the normal alarm time?) Feed your cat away from other pets so there is no competition in a clean, quiet, safe environment with familiar scents.



Use wide plates for food and water. Cats do not like dishes where their whiskers touch the sides. Remember, too, that cats can taste water, so offer a variety of bowls, fountains, locations and even filtered water.



If your cat is old, it likely has arthritis (90% of cats over 10 yrs. old do!), and this can make it difficult to bend the neck and elbows when hunkering down to eat. You can make it easier on them by having the food and water bowls elevated. You don't have to buy a fancy feeder- even a small 3-4" overturned box will work.



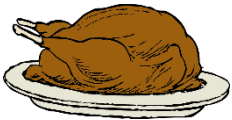
Baby food is often very appealing to cats (ham, poultry, beef flavors), warmed up. This is helpful if your cat is nauseous: the meat smell and taste that they love is present, but the baby food is blander and easier to digest.



Texture matters. Cats don't have a lot of taste buds, and the ones they do have taste mainly amino acids (in meats), acidic tastes, and can actually taste water. This means that smell and 'mouth feel' are used to sense food. Simply said, cats use their taste buds, entire mouth, and sense of smell to determine if they are going to like a food. So, offering a variety of tastes and textures of canned food is important. You can also try deli meat, boiled chicken or hamburger- all warmed up.



Churu is a lickable paste-like food found in the canned food/treats section of the supermarket or at the pet store and is appealing to many cats.



Moistening food: Chicken broth, chicken bouillon, tuna juice, or clam juice can appeal to some cats. Warming up these strong-smelling items are especially important if your cat has an upper respiratory infection. Cats need to smell the food to eat, so if they are stuffy, the strong smells of canned food or extra juice can help. The extra moisture will also help reduce the stuffiness.



Flavor enhancers like Fortiflora (available at the vet or over the counter) or sprinkling a little Parmesan cheese on the moist or dry food can increase palatability.



Do NOT force feed your cat. It can make them really hate mealtime, especially if they associate it with pain or nausea. Likewise, don't pill or do injections around feeding to prevent aversion by association.



My cat still won't eat! What about medical options? In addition to treating your cats' medical cause of a low appetite, your veterinarian can teach you to give subcutaneous fluids (dehydrated cats don't want to eat), b-vitamin injections (essential for appetite), nausea control, and appetite stimulants.