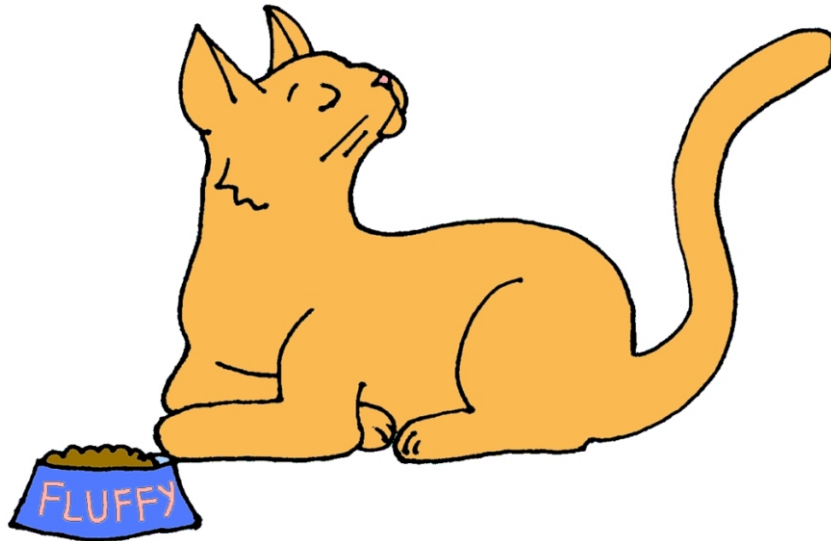


# Anorexia



**DO NOT IGNORE GRADUAL APPETITE REDUCTION.  
DO NOT IGNORE FOOD REFUSAL.**

Loss of appetite is one of the most important criteria in determining if a pet is significantly ill or just having a minor malady. Acceptance of favorite foods often determines if a pet should be hospitalized or not; further, nutritional support is essential for recovery from illness. A couple of off days is generally not a big problem as long as the pet maintains hydration either by consuming fluids or via fluids administered under the skin or intravenously but it is not long before support becomes essential. Nutritional support not only helps the pet recover but buys time to keep the pet stable while diagnosis is worked out.

**The term “anorexia” means simply “eating no food.”**

Many people get confused by the human eating disorder “anorexia nervosa.”

When the veterinarian says the pet has anorexia, it does not mean the pet has a distorted view of his or her body; it simply means the pet is not eating.

So how do we get a pet to eat? We will review some techniques here. Be sure to check with your veterinarian regarding the proper amount of food to feed and which foods are acceptable. Eating only a few bites of food or drinking the gravy does not constitute a good appetite so when asked if your pet is eating, this isn't really a yes or no question. Be specific about quantity.

**Don't wait for the appetite to completely disappear  
before seeking veterinary assistance.**

Pets with poor appetite are sick, and if you wait until the appetite is completely gone it may be too late for recovery. This is particularly true for cats. As the appetite fades, the pet must depend on stored fat for nutrients. When large amounts of fats are mobilized to meet energy demands, they must be processed by the liver before being used for Calories. The feline liver is not designed to handle large amounts of fat and will fail in a condition called hepatic lipidosis.

## First offer canned food.



If you think your pet's appetite is poor but are offering only kibbled food, your first step is to get some canned food and offer that. Most animals find canned diets far more palatable than dry foods and you may find that this step alone fully alleviates the problem. There is a misconception that canned food is somehow of poor nutritional quality. In fact, canned food and dry food differ primarily in their water content and thus in texture. If one considers the food without water, the raw diet is basically a powder or flour. It can be baked into a kibble or steamed into a canned food. Canned foods differ in quality just as dry foods do. See if the pet will eat a canned food or mixture of dry and canned food. Adding a flavored broth or cooked egg is also helpful in enticing the pet to eat a kibbled diet.

**Foods that are generally regarded as delicacies among pets include: canned chicken, cooked egg, and canned tuna.**

Hills a/d diet (a recovery formula designed for palatability) is generally well accepted.

With the exception of a/d diet, these treats are not nutritionally complete but can make a good "jump starters" for pets. A pet that has not been eating may feel continued discomfort until he or she begins eating again. Something tasty may be necessary to get the appetite re-started.



### A NOTE ON GOURMET CAT FOODS:



Several "extra tasty" products available in the grocery store can be very helpful in tempting a cat with a poor appetite. Fancy Feast by Purina comes in numerous textures and flavors, each can containing approximately 100 Calories. The diet is complete and balanced for cats and is often a good appetite "jump starter." Another product is Sheba Premium Cuts. This product represents cooked

poultry or fish shredded and presented in a flavorful gravy. While it is especially tempting for cats and an excellent meal supplement, it should be noted that this food is not complete and balanced and is meant only as a treat or supplement. Each container, despite its similar size to Fancy Feast, only contains 54-70 Calories. Both products make excellent temptations but when every Calorie counts, it is important to keep this information in mind.



**If the pet is supposed to eat a prescription diet but will not do so, do not attempt to starve the pet into eating the prescription food.**

Many prescription diets are relatively bland and pets do not wish to eat them particularly if they are used to eating large amounts of table scraps (always a bad practice) or a more flavorful regular food. Starving the pet will only make him or her sicker. Try a gradual change from the regular food to the new food over a week or so. If the pet simply will not accept the new food, be sure to let your veterinarian know this. There may be an alternative flavor to try; further, prescription diets are guaranteed by the manufacturer meaning you can get a full refund on the bag or case if the pet does not accept the food. Sometimes it is necessary to forgo the therapeutic aspect of the special diet just to get the pet to eat but your veterinarian will help you with these guidelines.

## **Many pets prefer to eat in private. Be sure other pets at home do not bully or distract the sick pet.**

In a multi-pet home, it may be difficult for the sickly or elderly pet to eat without the younger pets taking his or her food. Many animals wish to eat at their leisure particularly if they do not feel well. Consider giving your pet a private area and his or her own dish. Never feed multiple pets from the same bowl as one is sure to get the lion's share of the food to the other's disadvantage. Many pets like to eat overnight when no one is watching.

## **Appetite stimulating medications are available.**

There are medications that may be helpful in stimulating the appetite. Cyproheptadine has largely replaced diazepam and its relatives due to the latter's sedating properties. A newer medication called mirtazapine is becoming popular as it not only stimulates the appetite but also relieves nausea (and is given only once every three days to cats or once daily to dogs).

## **Liquid diets are available for syringe feeding.**

There is absolutely no reason to stand around and watch a pet fail to eat. If necessary, calories can be provided by syringe feeding. This can be messy especially if the pet is uncooperative and some sort of paper towel or cloth bib is probably a good idea. Be sure you know how much of the food you are supposed to feed. In general, the pet who has gone a relatively long time with a poor appetite will need a few days to readjust to nutrition and only half the normal amount is given at first.



## **Canned food may be force-fed but only if you know what you are doing.**

Assisted feeding is somewhat tricky. If the liquid diet is not working out, canned foods can be spoon fed or even formed into small “meatballs” and force fed in the same way that pills are administered. For some pets the struggling involved with force-feeding either by syringe or meatball method is simply too stressful. For these pets a feeding tube is needed to deliver the food.



“Bear” with feeding tube into his neck (esophagostomy).

## **Feeding tubes are the least stressful method of delivering nutrition.**

Feeding tubes can be placed through the nose, throat, directly into the stomach or into the intestine. Nasogastric tubes which go through the nose require no anesthesia to place but do require an Elizabethan collar to prevent the pet from yanking the tube out. They can accommodate only liquid diet because of their small diameter and are difficult to manage at home.

Tubes in the throat (pharyngostomy), in the esophagus (esophagostomy) or in the stomach (gastrostomy) are much easier to manage. A blenderized diet can be administered since the tubes are larger. Feeding does not require fussing with the pet’s face and thus is more comfortable. Bandages must be kept clean around the area and tubes must be kept in place for a minimum amount of time to allow for proper scar tissue to form sealing the feeding hole to the outer tissue. When the time comes, the tube can be pulled and the hole seals up. These kind of tubes require surgical placement and thus anesthetic risks apply.

**Nutritional support is essential to proper recovery and it is important to realize that there are many techniques available to see that the pet does not suffer extra debilitation from malnourishment.**

**If you think your pet has a problem with weight loss or inadequate appetite, do not wait until the problem is extreme; see your veterinarian for a proper evaluation promptly.**

A Feline Assisted-Feeding Newsgroup is available and can be joined by going to:

<http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/Feline-Assisted-Feeding/>



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