

# How to Change a Pet's Diet

## BACKGROUND

In general, dogs and cats do well eating the same diet routinely. Unlike people, pets rarely become bored with a single pet food, so change is not needed simply for the sake of variety. However, diet changes may be necessary because of reasons including:

1. Current diet is discontinued or out of stock
2. The pet may have a medical condition that requires a change of diet
3. The pet has entered a new life stage (from puppy to adult or from adult to geriatric)

The most important aspect of changing a pet's diet is to make the change gradually. Even when the only change is the flavor of the food, or the formulation (canned vs. dry) and not the brand of food, abrupt diet changes can result in food aversions or gastrointestinal upset in the form of vomiting or diarrhea.

Gastrointestinal upset can occur due to exposure to new ingredients, or changes in the composition of the food (for example, a change in fat content of the new food). This is especially common in dogs and cats that have a "sensitive" stomach or have had previous bouts of gastrointestinal upset.

## GETTING STARTED

Talk to your veterinarian about your pet's dietary needs. Your veterinarian will be able to provide you with the best recommendations in regard to the type of diet and volume of food your pet needs to receive an adequate but not excessive number of calories. Just like people, pets that eat too many calories will gain weight, while

pets that don't eat enough calories will lose weight. Not all pet foods have the same amount of calories per cup. If you haven't had the chance to discuss the amount of food to feed with your veterinarian yet, many pet food bags or cans provide guidance on the amount to feed based on your pet's weight.

## PROCEDURE

Slowly introduce your pet to the new diet by thoroughly mixing in a small amount (25%) of the new food with the current diet for the first 2 days. Monitor your pet's stool quality, attitude, and appetite. If the new diet is well tolerated, you may continue transitioning the diet by following the proportions shown in the table below until your pet is eating only the new diet.

Day	Current Diet	New Diet
1 – 2	75%	25%
3 – 4	50%	50%
5 – 6	25%	75%
7	0	100%

If your pet develops signs of gastrointestinal upset, you can try to prolong the transition, making the change even more gradually to allow more time for them to get adjusted to the new diet. If problems continue, you should either speak with your veterinarian, or if there are no medical issues to consider, try switching back to the previous, original food.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

*Do I need to transition my pet's diet gradually if the new food is from the same brand, but a different flavor or a new formulation?*

Yes. Some dogs or cats may have gastrointestinal upset after being exposed to a new ingredient, or flavoring, even if the food is made by the same manufacturer. Of course, other pets seem to have an "iron stomach", and they never have problems even with an abrupt switch.

*When is the right time to transition from a puppy or kitten food to an adult formulation?*

Pets should be fed an adult formulation when they have reached maturity, meaning when they are done growing. Ask your veterinarian when it would be appropriate for your pet to change to a new diet. Small-breed dogs and all cats can change from a puppy/kitten diet to

an adult diet as early as 7 to 9 months of age. Most medium breed dogs mature between 12-14 months. Some large or giant-breed dogs may not reach maturity until they are 15 to 20 months of age, and these age cutoffs are used for choosing when to change to an adult diet.

*What if my pet does not like or tolerate a diet that was prescribed by a veterinarian?*

Prescription diets have very specific nutrient profiles for a particular disease condition. There are different manufacturers that may have similar diets to the one your veterinarian prescribed. If your pet does not like or tolerate the prescription diet, contact your veterinarian to discuss other diet alternatives. There is almost always something else to try!

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