

# How to Provide Elevated Feedings

## BACKGROUND

Some health problems and diseases of dogs and cats can make it difficult or risky for them to eat from a bowl set on the floor. Examples include megaesophagus, where the food risks being regurgitated and inhaled into the lungs; cervical intervertebral disc disease, where neck movement can cause neck pain; and any condition that requires a neck brace, such as the healing phase after surgery for atlantoaxial occipital malformation.

Elevated feedings can be extremely helpful when pets have these types of medical conditions. The purpose of elevated feedings is to reduce the risks associated with these diseases and increase comfort. This is done by positioning the food and water bowls in such a way that the pet can eat and drink from them in a sitting or standing position without bending the neck down to the ground.

## GETTING STARTED

Equipment needed:

- A stack of medium- or large-sized books that are stable when stacked. Alternatively, wooden boards, an empty milk crate, or a combination of these may be just as useful. Be sure to use materials that are not valuable, since splashing and dropping of food may, over time, damage or ruin the books.
- Nonskid rubber mat material, which can be purchased at a kitchen supply store or department store (normally used for lining the bottom of kitchen cupboards or placing between dishes in cupboards to protect the dishes)
- Food and water bowls
- ± Kitchen plastic wrap
- ± Elevated feeding system

## TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

Some pets may resist eating from elevated food stations. With patience, you can make elevated feedings comfortable. There is often some trial and error in finding the right height for your pet.

If your pet has difficulty eating food despite an elevated bowl, consult your veterinarian and if possible, bring along a video recording of your pet eating so the veterinarian can compare what you see at home with what he/she detects when examining your pet.

## PROCEDURE

- The proper height for bowls when providing elevated feedings is approximately the same as the height of your pet's back when he or she is standing.
- A simple homemade feeding platform is a good starting point and may be used permanently if it works well for you and your pet.
  - Make a stable stack of books, boards, or both, approximately as high as your pet's back when he or she is standing normally. For large dogs, a milk crate or other rigid box may make a good base and books/boards can be added to achieve the right height. If the top of your dog's back happens to be the same height as the seat of a chair, then simply putting the food and water bowls on chairs also can work very well.
  - The stack of books/boards is usually straight and tall, like a tower. A broad-based stack (pyramid-shaped) may also work well if your pet has esophageal motility dysfunction or megaesophagus as a reason for the elevated feedings. With a pyramid-shaped stack, your pet can use part of the base as a step, and doing so raises the front part of the body

higher than the back part. This excellent posture helps food move downward from the mouth to the stomach while your pet is eating, thanks to gravity.

- Before placing any bowls on the stack, check the stability of the stack, because it should resist bumping without toppling. If it seems unstable, you can either choose wider books/boards (or books that have less slippery covers), or you may use kitchen plastic wrap to wrap the stack tightly, creating a solid tower.
- Place the empty food and water bowls on the stack, and check that they are not likely to slide off when bumped, creating a mess. Some pet food bowls and water bowls have nonskid bottoms, but most do not. If the bowls are prone to sliding, place a nonskid mat on top of the stack first.
- Fill the bowls and observe your pet's use of this feeding platform. If you see reluctance or unwillingness, you may adjust the height slightly (up to 25%) upward or downward by adding or removing books, respectively.
- Purpose-made permanent elevated food systems exist and can be purchased in pet supply stores if you prefer to replace the books/boards/milk crate approach. Or if you are handy, it is a fairly straightforward project to build such a system.

## AFTERWARDS

Keep the head up after every feeding for esophageal disorders.

- If your pet has esophageal motility dysfunction or megaesophagus, the main goal of elevated feedings is to help food travel from the mouth down to the stomach in a normal fashion and prevent it from refluxing or regurgitating out the mouth.
- After every feeding, you should be sure to keep your pet with his/her head up, level with the floor or even with the nose pointing slightly upward, for as long as possible (preferably at least 10 to 15 minutes). Otherwise, a pet that tilts his or her head down, as when sniffing the floor or drinking out of a bowl on the floor, allows gravity to pull the food back in the wrong direction (toward the mouth), and this can cause gagging, choking, and pneumonia.



A stand for food bowls can allow a dog to eat without lowering his or her head.

- This elevation of the head does not need to be a physical restraint; it is fine to keep the head from bending down just by keeping your pet's attention (or cradling in your arms for cats that tolerate and enjoy it, in an upright sitting position in the crook of

your arm or over your shoulder like burping a baby). The point is to avoid letting your pet immediately lie down or stand with the head pointing down, which are body postures that cause reflux.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### *Where can I purchase an elevated feeding system?*

Many pet stores and online pet retailers sell elevated feeding systems. Some systems are adjustable, eliminating the need for various sizes of books. However, you may wish to try the books/boards/milk crate approach to ensure your pet will eat from an elevated system prior to purchase. There are also designs to build these systems available on the Internet: if you find plans you like, ask your veterinarian if they think it will work before you put in the time and effort to build. One well-recognized design is the Bailey chair ([www.baileychairs4dogs.com](http://www.baileychairs4dogs.com)).

### *Do I just feed the regular food?*

Your veterinarian can discuss the best food consistency to feed. If your pet has megaesophagus or esophageal motility dysfunction, canned food in the form of meatballs may be preferable. Regardless, a nutritionally-balanced diet is appropriate.

### *What do I do about my other dogs/cats in the household?*

The position of the food on an elevated surface should not create a difference for other pets, and it may actually discourage some of them from eating food that is not theirs. However, it is important

to make sure that your pet who needs the elevated feedings does not eat or drink from non-elevated bowls. This may require you to relocate the non-elevated bowls out of reach of the pet who needs the elevated feedings.

### *I have more than one water bowl around the house. Should all the bowls be elevated?*

Yes. The point is to have a raised surface from which to eat or drink, no matter where this is (including when traveling, walking/hiking, and so on).

### *My pet needs elevated feedings and also has an Elizabethan collar at the moment. How do I make this work?*

Elevated feedings can actually make it easier for a pet to eat while wearing an Elizabethan collar (lampshade-type collar), because the food and water are closer to the face, and the collar is less likely to hit the ground when the pet eats. Just be sure the stack of books/boards/milk crate is solid and can withstand bumping or sideswiping with the Elizabethan collar; if not, reinforce with kitchen plastic wrap.

Practice Stamp or Name & Address

Also available in Spanish.