

5 Things to Do Now if Your Cat Won't Eat

When your cat stops eating, it's a big deal. Unlike dogs, a kitty not eating for as little as 16 hours can suffer from a life-threatening cascade in which her body starts sending cells to the liver to convert to energy. Don't wait until it is too late - do these five things now to entice her to eat.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- One of the first signs a cat is sick is lack of appetite; since kitties can't go without food for very long at all due to the risk of hepatic lipidosis, it's important to address the problem quickly
- Cats who feel stressed can lose their appetite; this is a situation that can often be resolved without consulting a veterinarian
- There are also several underlying diseases that can cause kitties to lose interest in eating; it's important to contact your veterinarian right away if you suspect your cat is ill
- There are things you can do to try to entice your kitty to eat on day one; however, veterinary intervention is necessary if despite your best efforts, your cat doesn't begin eating

One of the first signs something is wrong with your feline family member is lack of interest in food, which is why it's so important to keep a close eye on kitty's eating behavior (and bathroom habits as well). Sometimes a cat will suddenly stop eating; other times it's a gradual or periodic refusal to eat. Your cat's lack of appetite can trigger a vicious cycle — the less she eats, the worse she feels, and her appetite drops off even further.

This is a downward spiral you don't want your cat to get caught in, so every effort should be made to encourage her to eat. Unlike dogs, cats can't safely go without food for more than about 16 hours.

Has Stress Caused Your Cat's Lack of Appetite?

The first thing to consider with a kitty who isn't eating is whether there's been a change in his environment or routine. For cats, change is stressful, and a **stressed kitty** will often lose his appetite. Stressful events for a cat can include:

- A new member of the household, either two or four-legged
- Parties or lots of visitors
- The sudden absence of a family member
- Neighborhood cats that are visible to your cat or that he can hear or smell
- Moving to a new home
- **The stress of getting older**
- A change in your daily schedule that has you home at different times or less often than your cat is used to

Sometimes something as simple as changing the location of your cat's food bowl or **litterbox** can create stress.

If you suspect a change is behind your cat's loss of appetite, if possible, return things to the "old normal" and see if the situation improves. Alternatively, keep kitty's "new normal" as consistent as possible and as long as he's still eating some of his food, give him a few days to adjust.

5 Tips for Stress-Free Feline Dining

There are several simple steps pet parents can take that can help promote a healthier emotional eating environment for the cats in the family.¹

1. Offer food in a variety of ways that gives your cat more control over her environment. When possible, feed smaller, frequent meals throughout the day, instead of two larger meals. Use food puzzles, **hunting feeders** (my favorite), or other novel methods that encourage her to actively look for food and burn calories in the process.
2. In a multi-cat household, feed everyone separately. Establish multiple feeding locations that provide solitary access to food. Food puzzles, hunting feeders and regular bowls/saucers containing small amounts of food can be placed in different spots around the house to help satisfy the natural feline desire to dine in different locations. It also encourages cats to spend time hunting for food and allows them to be in control of their food intake.
3. Try feeding your kitty from an elevated location, like on top of the washing machine (when it's not in use!), since cats tend to feel safer in high spots where they can see what's going on around them. Food can be placed on elevated platforms, in hideaways, or in/on cat towers that encourage jumping up to the food.
4. Try to place your cat's food in areas with minimal human activity and away from loud noises, strong odors, and visual threats (e.g., a window where kitty might catch a glimpse of another cat outside).

Feed cats on flat dishware that doesn't harbor odors (so no plastic bowls). Set aside time to play with your cat each day, which will provide him with both physical and mental stimulation that releases endorphins, the "feel good" hormones.

Does Your Cat Have an Underlying Disease?

If a change in your cat's environment doesn't seem to be the problem behind her lack of appetite, I strongly encourage you to make an appointment with your veterinarian as soon as possible. Your vet will do a thorough physical exam and diagnostic workup, and investigate metabolic changes such as hypertension, blood potassium levels, anemia, etc.

He or she should also consider the brand of food you are currently feeding and any medications or supplements kitty is taking to rule those out as a cause. There are many health-related reasons that cause cats to lose interest in food, including:

- An upper respiratory infection (inhibiting the ability to smell food)
- Nasal tumors or polyps
- Gum disease or oral infection

- Oral tumors
- A gastrointestinal (GI) disorder (e.g., nausea, constipation, obstruction or foreign body ingestion, **inflammatory bowel disease**, pancreatitis, cancer)
- Congestive heart failure

If there's a disease process underlying your cat's lack of appetite, the sooner you find out what it is and begin treating it, the better.

In the meantime, you need to try other things to encourage your cat to eat to keep him nourished and to prevent hepatic lipidosis (fatty liver disease), which can develop rapidly in an anorexic cat. After a short time (as I mentioned earlier, in as little as 16 hours) without food or adequate daily calories, a cat's body will begin sending fat cells to the liver to convert to energy. That's where the problem begins because cats' bodies don't handle the rush of incoming fat efficiently. The process happens faster with overweight or obese cats; the more metabolically fit your cat is, the less risk there is for this condition to occur within a day.

Enticing a Reluctant Cat to Eat

Helping a cat who is refusing to eat stay nourished is an exercise in creativity, gentle encouragement, and patience. Here are a few tips to tempt kitty's tastebuds:

1. Warm her meals to bring out the aroma (cats respond to the smell of food before the taste).
2. Lure her with species-appropriate "people food" she has enjoyed in the past, for example, warm baked chicken or salmon.
3. Offer her canned food with a strong smell or a **sardine** (packed in water). Offer new food from a paper plate (in case she associates a bad memory with her food bowl).
4. If she's hooked on kibble and refuses everything else, try adding warm water or broth to the food or an aromatic enticement like tuna juice or chicken broth.
5. Buy a small selection of different flavors and textures of canned cat food or homecooked meat or **bone broth** and see if one catches her interest.

Some older cats seem to have senior moments in which they wander away from their food after taking a few bites, then wander back in a bit and eat some more. If this sounds like your kitty, as long as she wanders back to her bowl and eats most or all of it, just leave her food down for her for a reasonable amount of time (not long enough for it to spoil) and let her eat at her own pace.

Try to make your cat's mealtime a pleasant experience for her. Make sure she's in a calm, quiet environment that is optimally comfortable. If she's hesitant to eat from her bowl, try offering food from a clean paper plate or hand feeding her tiny amounts. You can also try putting small amounts of watered-down, blenderized food into her mouth with a syringe, but only if she's willing. Force-feeding is very stressful for cats and the humans who attempt it often end up bitten or scratched.

Be sure to pet and praise her along the way, and no matter how worried or frustrated you may be feeling, try not to transmit your concern to your cat.

What to Do If Your Cat Still Won't Eat

If despite your best efforts you can't get sufficient calories into your cat, call your veterinarian, who may prescribe an appetite stimulant, an all-in-one liquid diet, or a vitamin B12 injection. There are also a variety of natural remedies integrative vets may suggest.

If your cat is also drinking more water or not drinking enough, there's a good chance the problem is an underlying disease process, and your veterinarian will need to determine what's going on. If he's anorexic long enough, your vet may recommend a feeding tube. This isn't pleasant to contemplate, but it's crucial that your kitty stays nourished until he's eating again on his own. Often a feeding tube is actually much less stressful for cat and owner and is highly efficient in keeping kitty fed and hydrated (and medicated, if necessary).

Sources and References

[PetMD July 31, 2020](#)

[PetMD March 26, 2018](#)

¹ [dvm360](#)
