

# Don't Ignore This Feline Illness Indicator

This is one of the first hints your cat is not well, whether sudden or gradual. But, it can lead to a slippery slope you don't want your kitty to get caught in. So if she stops doing this, a bit of creativity may motivate her. Otherwise, a vet visit is definitely in order.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A sign of illness in cats is refusal to eat, which can be sudden, gradual, or intermittent
- There are many things that can affect your kitty's appetite, including a change in her environment or routine
- A cat who isn't eating should be seen by a veterinarian, and meanwhile, the kitty's guardian should attempt to keep him nourished using a variety of enticements
- Cats, unlike dogs and people, cannot go without food for long. An undernourished kitty's organs, in particular the liver, will begin to deteriorate within a matter of days

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published November 12, 2015.***

One of the first signs of illness in cats is lack of interest in food. Sometimes a kitty will suddenly stop eating; other times it's a gradual or intermittent refusal to eat. The problem is that the less a cat eats, the worse she feels, and her appetite drops off even further.

This is a downward spiral you don't want your kitty to get caught in, so every effort should be made to encourage her to eat.

## Has Something Changed in Your Cat's Environment or Daily Routine?

The first thing to consider with a cat who isn't eating is whether there's been a change in his environment or routine. For cats, change equals stress, 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 give him a few days to adjust.

## **Does Your Cat Have an Undiagnosed Disorder or Disease?**

If a change in your cat's environment doesn't seem to be the problem, I strongly encourage you to make an appointment with your veterinarian as soon as possible. There are many health-related reasons that cause cats to lose interest in food. If there's a disease process underlying his 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 feline hepatic lipidosis (fatty liver disease), which can develop rapidly in an anorexic cat.

After a short time without food or adequate daily calories — a few days at most — 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 metabolize fat efficiently.

## **Tips and Tricks for Enticing Your Cat to Eat**

Helping a cat who is refusing to eat stay nourished is an exercise in creativity, gentle prodding, and patience. There are several things you can do to tempt kitty's tastebuds, for example:

- Warm her regular diet to bring out the aroma (cats respond to the smell of food rather than the taste)
- Entice her with species-appropriate "people food" she has enjoyed in the past, such as warm baked chicken or salmon
- 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 from her food bowl)
- If she's addicted to dry food and refuses everything else, try adding warm water to the kibble, or add an aromatic enticement like tuna juice or chicken broth
- Buy a small selection of different flavors and textures of canned cat food or home-cooked 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 by hand-feeding her tiny amounts. You can also try putting small amounts of watered-down 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 kitty and praise her along the way, and no matter how worried or frustrated you may be feeling, try not to transmit your angst to your cat.

## **If Your Best Efforts Fail**

If despite your best efforts you can't get sufficient calories into your cat, alert your veterinarian, who may prescribe an appetite stimulant, a homeopathic remedy, or a vitamin B12 injection.

If your cat is losing weight from not eating, he is most likely sick and your veterinarian will need to determine what's causing his lack of appetite. If your cat loses a significant amount of weight, 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).

It's important to understand that unlike dogs and humans, cats can't go for long without food. The consequences of poor nutrition in your cat will begin to negatively affect his organs within a matter of days.

## **Sources and References**

[PetMD December 26, 2014](#)

---