INAPPETENCE

Managing the cat that won't eat: information for owners/caregivers

Loss of appetite can be a sign of an underlying illness or pain that needs veterinary attention. Stress and a stay in the veterinary clinic can also result in your cat eating less. In every case, you will need to work with your veterinarian to ensure your cat receives the care and nutrition required to return to good health.

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What does inappetence mean?

Inappetence is a term used to describe a reduction in appetite, which is a common sign of illness in cats. If your cat is inappetent you will notice that they are eating less than their normal daily intake of food, or even nothing at all. You may, for example, describe your cat as 'not eating as well as normal' or having a 'reduced appetite', or being 'fussy' or 'picky' or refusing food. Your cat may show some interest in food, sniff at it but walk away. Your veterinary surgeon may use the term 'anorexia' if there is a complete loss of appetite, or 'hyporexia' if your cat is eating less than normal.

If you notice your cat eating less, or becoming more selective (choosy) with food, or even eating differently (dropping food, chewing on one side), contact your veterinary clinic. It is important to investigate the underlying cause (see page 3). Not eating enough, even for a period as short as three days, can have significant negative consequences for a cat, making any illness worse and causing other complications; hence the importance of seeking veterinary advice.

Some illnesses and injuries can make it difficult for cats to eat, although their appetite is normal – for example, a jaw injury, dental disease or trouble swallowing. In this situation, once the illness or injury is treated, the cat's appetite should return to normal, although veterinary assistance, such as the placement of a feeding tube (see page 10), may be needed while the cat recovers.

This Cat Carer Guide is focused on those cats that are being managed at home and are eating less than normal, perhaps after recent veterinary treatment. Any visit to the clinic, whether it is a lengthy stay in hospital, a day as a surgical patient or simply a consultation, can be a stressful experience. If the condition being treated is associated with inappetence, then this failure to eat normally may continue when the cat returns home.

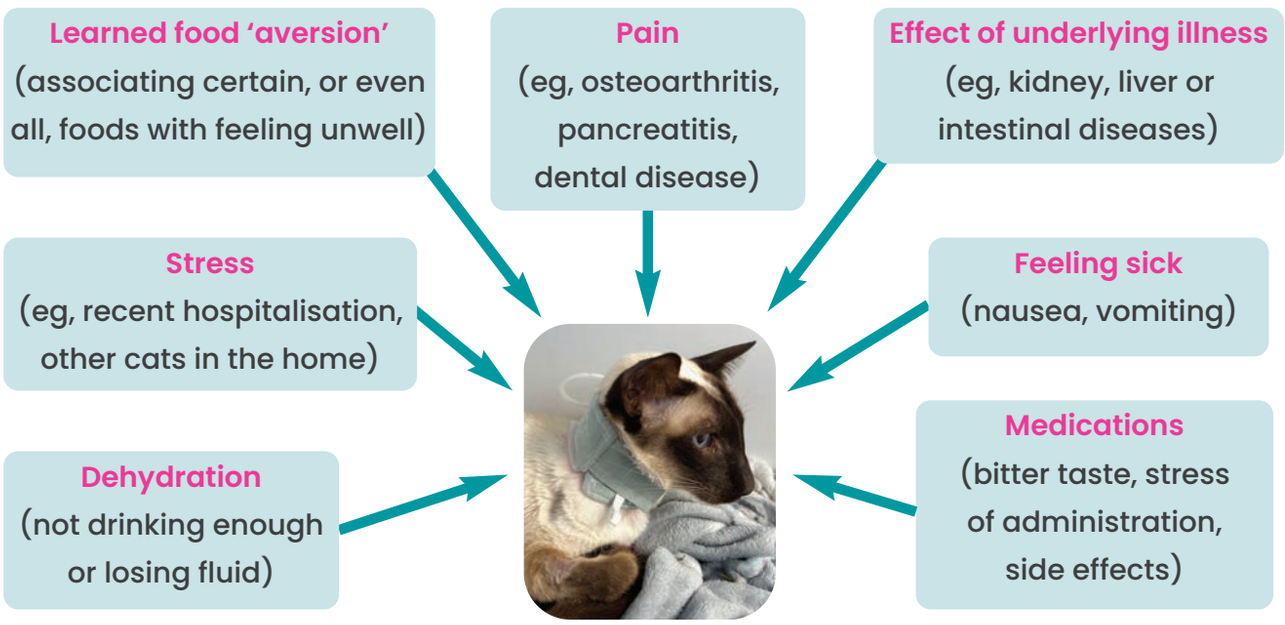

Figure 1: There are many reasons why a cat might refuse food or eat less than normal, and these can act singly or in combination to reduce a cat's appetite. (Osteoarthritis is inflammation of the joints, and pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas; both are painful but common conditions in cats)

Why is my cat not eating?

There are many reasons why your cat may not be eating normally, including factors affecting their physical health and/or mental wellbeing. Generally, cats may not eat if they are feeling sick (nauseous), suffering pain or stress, or as a direct effect of their underlying illness (Figure 1).

Illnesses that can reduce appetite

Illnesses can be acute (occur suddenly) or chronic (persistent or recurring), and both have the potential to affect a cat's appetite. Examples include:

- Kidney disease (acute or chronic);
- Pancreatic, gastrointestinal (stomach and intestines) or liver disease;
- Conditions affecting a cat's sense of smell (eg, cat 'flu' or other nasal disease);
- Dental disease or other oral (mouth) pain;
- Abscesses (eg, caused by a bite from another cat);
- Neoplasia (cancer);
- Conditions causing pain (eg, osteoarthritis);
- Neurological disease (causing nausea or affecting the brain's ability to control appetite);
- Constipation (difficulty passing faeces).

Signs of pain in cats

Just like us, when cats are in pain they do not feel like eating. However, cats can hide signs of pain and may just show subtle changes in normal behaviour, such as sleeping more and in unusual places, moving and standing stiffly, changes in urination/defecation, and reduced grooming and interaction with the family. For more information, see International Cat Care's Cat Carer Guide to recognising and managing acute pain in cats, available at icatcare.org/advice/cat-carer-guides.

Nausea

Feeling sick is an unpleasant sensation and may or may not be accompanied by vomiting (being sick). Signs your cat may be feeling sick include:

- Turning away from the food bowl (they may initially show interest and approach the bowl of food, or even ask for food, and then refuse it);
- 'Lip smacking' (exaggerated licking of the lips);
- Exaggerated swallowing (repeated and obvious);
- Excessive drooling (Figure 2);
- Gagging or dry retching (non-productive vomiting), which may occur at the sight or smell of food.

Figure 2: This cat is feeling very nauseous and is drooling saliva. Cats may also show more subtle signs of nausea such as refusing food. Source: Dr Sam Taylor

Learned food aversion

If cats that are experiencing nausea, pain or discomfort associate feeling unwell with the act of eating or seeing or smelling a particular food (or even any food), they may develop a so-called learned food aversion. Even when the underlying physical condition is resolved, the cat may show signs of feeling sick when presented with food, particularly if this food was offered when the cat was ill. Food aversion can also occur if a cat has been 'force' or 'syringe' fed (which is, in any case, not advisable as it causes stress, risks the cat inhaling food into the lungs and rarely provides enough calories). Food aversion may be treated with appetite stimulants (medications that improve appetite), avoiding diets fed while the cat was unwell, and by reducing stress; occasionally a feeding tube may be required (see page 10).

Stress

A cat that is experiencing stress may be inappetent, or may still be hungry but not want to eat. Cats are very susceptible to becoming stressed, and there may be numerous factors involved, in relation to both the physical environment (where they live or, if they are hospitalised, the veterinary clinic) and the people and animals within it. What causes stress is a very individual thing, depending on the cat's early life experiences, its temperament or character (eg, shy or confident) and its ability to cope with challenges. The severity, duration and frequency of the perceived 'stressor' (the situation or thing that is causing stress) are also important factors.

Causes of stress might include other cats in the home (residents or entering via the cat flap) or outside (in towns there may be many cats in a small area), or the return of a cat after a period of absence (eg, after a visit to the veterinary clinic – see box). Changes to their home environment such as moving house, building work, being confined indoors, a new pet or baby, excessive noise or strong smells can also cause stress. If the cat's 'resources' (all the facilities that your cat needs, including somewhere to eat, drink, go to the toilet, sleep, play, climb and hide) are not available, positioned wrongly (Figure 3), or access is restricted, this can likewise cause a cat stress.

Figure 3: 'Resources' are the things that are important to cats. If they are positioned incorrectly, as in this case of a food bowl placed next to a litter tray, this may cause stress. Source: Vicky Halls

Returning from the veterinary clinic to a home with other resident cat(s)

A cat returning from a visit to the veterinary clinic will inevitably smell of the clinic environment. This novel odour can cause other cats in the household to respond aggressively to the returning cat, which no longer smells familiar. This encounter can impact on previously bonded animals and lead to a breakdown in the relationship in the longer term.

Here are some tips for minimising the risk of antagonistic encounters:
- Bedding from home can be put into the cat carrier for the return journey to help to reinstate a more familiar scent;
- On returning home, keep cats separate initially for 12 to 24 hours;
- Groom and stroke the returning cat (providing the cat experiences this as a positive thing); this will make the smell of the clinic less evident when the cats meet;
- Supervise reunions, making sure they are calm and that the needs of the returning cat are met; for example, chasing or playing should be discouraged initially until your cat is well again.

Encouraging your cat to eat at home

It can be upsetting when your cat is eating less than normal. The first thing to remember, however, is to stay calm and try not to worry – your own behaviour, influenced by your concern, may actually hinder efforts to get your cat's appetite back on track. Your natural desire to tempt your cat to eat may result in you changing your routines and behaving unusually around food – this, in itself, may put your cat off eating.
It may be helpful to consider instead the recommendations below to tempt your cat to eat, rather than trying to force the issue.

Every cat is an individual and this is particularly relevant when it comes to learning how best to encourage a cat to eat. Your veterinary clinic will be treating the underlying illness, but there are certainly things that you can do to encourage the first steps back to normal eating habits.

What do I feed?

Cats often develop preferences for specific foods at an early age, and these preferences can become fixed and inhibit them from trying new foods in the future. The taste, texture and smell of food all influence a cat's motivation to eat, and even a slightly different shaped dry food kibble may deter a cat from eating. Therefore, the ideal food to feed initially is the one that your cat has previously enjoyed (providing this is appropriate for your cat's illness). Food should be fresh, fed in a clean bowl and ideally measured to give an idea of how much is eaten. Your vet may have given you a special diet for your cat's condition, but in most cases it is better to get your cat's appetite back on track again before gradually introducing a new diet for the long-term management of a specific condition. If your cat is reluctant to eat a newly prescribed diet then contact your veterinary clinic to discuss alternatives.

You may want to consider offering 'treat' food to kickstart their appetite – special high-value items that your cat has previously enjoyed, such as fish or chicken or commercial treats. Be cautious with giving too many treats or human food and check with your veterinary clinic if unsure. Try to avoid offering a 'buffet' selection of multiple different types of food; anyone who themselves has felt a little sick or not like eating will recognise that plates of different types and flavours of food all at once would not be appetising!

Always check with your veterinary clinic what diet to feed and how much, and if treats and tempting with human food is appropriate. Requirements may vary between cats and between illnesses.

How much and how often do I feed?

Cats that are inappetent tend to feel full quicker, so it is helpful to feed small quantities of food at regular intervals, rather than give your cat large amounts of food all at once. For example, offering a tablespoonful of food every two hours would be a good way to start, gradually increasing the amount per portion as your cat's appetite increases. Some cats prefer to 'graze', eating a little at a time of their choosing, but try to avoid leaving large amounts of food down as this can overwhelm an inappetent cat.

Another important recommendation is to feed at times other than those specifically scheduled for giving medication or other treatments. If you combine the two processes, particularly if you intend to mix medication in food, it could result in your cat refusing meals in case they contain medication, and missing doses (see 'How is it best to give medication?, on page 8).

How do I feed?

Whatever methods you use to try to encourage your cat to eat, it is best to avoid active interference with the eating process itself, such as force feeding via a spoon or syringe or by placing food directly in your cat's mouth; or simply hovering close by and watching your cat eat in a way you would not do if your cat's appetite was normal. Trying to adopt normal everyday routines and behaviour around your cat, and not getting too involved in the actual process of them eating, will reduce stress. The important thing is to make mealtimes as comfortable and relaxed as possible and this means, for most cats, following the usual pattern of how food has been presented in the past. Every cat is different, and what is helpful advice for some cats may not be for others. It is therefore useful for you to observe your cat's behaviour around food, when presented, to enable you to establish how best to proceed.

Type of bowl

The type of bowl the food is offered in can make a difference. For example, most cats prefer ceramic or stainless steel bowls to plastic, as the plastic can taint the smell of the food. However, if your cat has a favourite plastic bowl then stick to this. If your cat does not have a preferred bowl (or resists eating from a particular bowl) then consider placing food in a wider bowl or on a flat dish or plate, as some cats will spend longer at a food bowl if the diameter (width) allows them to lower their head and eat without their sensitive whiskers touching against the sides of the bowl (Figure 4).

Preparing the food

As a cat's appetite can be stimulated by the smell of food, it may be helpful to warm food to body temperature to enhance the aroma and increase its palatability. This may be counterproductive, however, if there is any risk that your cat may have developed a learned aversion to food during the course of their illness. In this case the opposite would apply: chilling the food or serving at room temperature will reduce the strong odour and taste, and may encourage your cat to eat. This may be useful to try if your cat appears keen to eat and approaches food but then walks away.

Figure 4: A wide diameter bowl allows the cat to lower its head and eat (or drink) without its sensitive whiskers touching the sides of the bowl. Source: Dr Sam Taylor

Company or not?

Some cats prefer company when they eat, while others prefer to eat alone. You know your cat well, so you may find that stroking and talking softly to your cat as you present some food encourages them to eat. This gentle persuasion must come across to your cat as a positive thing; it is easy to be anxious for them to eat and be more insistent in your behaviour, which will not have the desired effect. If in doubt, it is probably best to stay well away at the point where your cat is considering whether to eat.

Where do I feed?

Whether or not your cat will eat is also influenced by the environment in which they are fed. The location where food is

Figure 5: Avoid feeding in an area associated with potential threats – for example, adjacent to a cat flap or full length window. Source: Dr Sam Taylor

presented and what is going on around them are important to consider. Other cats and dogs (or even other people) being present while you are tempting your cat to eat may be an issue. This is particularly relevant if there has historically been any friction or competitive behaviour between cats in your household, as this can influence eating habits.

If your cat is reluctant to eat in their normal feeding location then you may get better results by feeding in a novel setting, or even asking another member of the family or a familiar person to take on the role of 'feeder'. The chosen feeding site, if the usual feeding station is avoided, should be in a quiet location, away from objects or areas that are associated with other activities (eg, litter boxes) or that may be associated with potential threat (Figure 5), such as:

- Full-length glass windows;
- Cat flaps;
- Busy thoroughfares;
- Noisy household appliances (eg, kitchen equipment, washing machines or televisions).

As cats are opportunistic feeders (meaning they will potentially take advantage of food wherever and whenever it is offered), some may be more inclined to eat if their owners hide food, particularly dry kibble, in novel locations. This may be sufficient to stimulate your cat to eat. For cats recovering from surgery or with limited mobility, food may be brought to them, and cats with osteoarthritis or spinal/neck pain may prefer their food bowl to be raised to avoid them bending their neck.

Encouraging your cat to drink

Cats obtain much of their daily water from food. If your cat is inappetent, it is important to ensure there are sufficient and inviting sources of water to encourage them to drink and avoid the risk of them becoming dehydrated, which may worsen their inappetence and cause constipation. For that reason, make sure your cat has easy access to plenty of fresh water. Some cats prefer running water, so investing in a pet drinking fountain (Figure 6) designed for cats might tempt them. Cats are sensitive to the taste of water, and some may prefer bottled water over tap water, or rainwater over boiled water, for example.

Figure 6: Encouraging your cat to drink (eg, with a pet drinking fountain if it prefers running water) helps prevent dehydration. Source: Vicky Halls

If you are providing water in a bowl, then some cats will prefer a wide, relatively shallow bowl where they can drink without their whiskers touching the sides. In multi-cat households, ensuring there are sufficient places to drink water will avoid any risk of assertive cats guarding water and preventing others from drinking (the same applies to the provision of food bowls). Placing the bowl away from the wall so your cat can face in any direction while drinking can encourage some cats to stay drinking for longer as they can observe what is happening around them. A water bowl can also be placed outside if your cat has access outdoors (Figure 7). Some experts recommend that water is provided away from food sources, to mimic the natural behaviour of the species to eat and drink in separate locations.

Figure 7: Placing a wide-brimmed water bowl outside in an open space can encourge drinking. Source: Dr Sam Taylor

If you are worried your cat is not drinking enough, you can discuss with your vet feeding a wet (tinned/sachet) diet or adding a little water to food. Other strategies include feeding flavoured water, such as spring water that comes with canned tuna or water that chicken is boiled in (without stock), or offering watered-down cat 'soups' that are commercially available. Cat milks are not generally recommended as they are not a balanced food and can cause stomach upsets.

How is it best to give medication?

It is possible that your cat has returned from veterinary care with medication to treat an underlying condition. However, we all know that giving medications to cats can be challenging, even more so if they are not eating well. Hiding medication in food can deter a cat from eating, so it is never advisable to give with a main meal. Instead try with a treat (some products are specifically designed to help medicate cats) or ask your vet if you can crush tablets into a small amount of food. If this approach fails, your vet may be able to provide you with the same medication but in a different formulation, such as a flavoured liquid, based on your cat's specific needs. You could also ask your veterinary team to demonstrate how to put the tablet directly into the back of your cat's mouth. Some bitter-tasting medications can be improved by storing the tablets or liquid in the fridge beforehand, or putting them into a gelatin capsule, so discuss if this is appropriate with your vet.

See icatcare.org/advice/how-to-give-your-cat-a-tablet for more information on medicating cats.

Monitoring your cat's eating and body weight

If your cat is fed ad libitum (ie, provided with a supply of food and given the choice regarding how much and how often they eat), it may be difficult for you to determine the actual amount your cat has been eating and whether there has been any associated weight loss or, if recovering from illness, weight gain. Monitoring your cat's weight at regular intervals will help you to plot your cat's

Figure 8: An inappetent cat can lose muscle and this can be particularly evident on the back, resulting in the spine feeling more prominent. In this image the cat also has a scurfy, dull haircoat, which can indicate pain or illness.
Source: Dr Sam Taylor

progress and keep your veterinary team informed of any changes. Some important points to consider are as follows:

- Weigh your cat as often as your vet recommends, likely weekly;
- Weighing yourself with and without your cat is an inaccurate method, which would miss small weight changes. Electronic paediatric scales, designed for weighing babies and readily available to purchase, will give you a more accurate figure;
- Body and muscle condition scoring is a technique by which you can monitor your cat's overall health by making certain observations on the shape of your cat's body, viewed from the top and from the side (see wsava.org/global-guidelines/global-nutrition-guidelines). Muscle scoring is also used in cats to monitor the type of body tissue that is being lost, as cats can stay fat but lose muscle mass. If you run your hands over certain areas, such as over the spine (Figure 8), it is easy to feel the bony prominences of the vertebrae (bones of the spine)if the muscles have wasted in that area; normally this region would feel fairly solid and smooth.

Working with your veterinary clinic

Good communication between you and your veterinary clinic is key to providing the best possible care for your cat and also helps to alleviate some of the anxiety that you may be feeling when your cat is unwell. Choosing to register with a Cat Friendly Clinic (catfriendlyclinic.org; Figure 9) gives a caregiver confidence that the veterinary team understand cats and work hard to reduce the stress of a veterinary visit.

Figure 9: Veterinary practices that are accredited Cat Friendly Clinics handle cats quietly and carefully to avoid stress, which can encourage cats to eat if hospitalised. This cat, for example, has been given a comfortable bed in which to hide.
Source: Dr Sam Taylor

What are feeding tubes?

Various types of feeding tubes can be placed by the veterinary team to treat cats that are not eating enough, and also to help give medications. The tubes may run from a cat's nose to the oesophagus or stomach (naso-oesophageal or nasogastric tube, respectively) or from the side of the neck into the oesophagus (oesophagostomy tube). Although these might sound unpleasant, cats tolerate them very well and they can really help a patient's recovery. Oesophagostomy tubes (Figure 10), for example, can be used at home by caregivers to feed liquid food and slurries so the cat gets enough nutrition while it either does not feel like eating or cannot eat (eg, fractured jaw). Your vet will discuss how to care for the feeding tube.

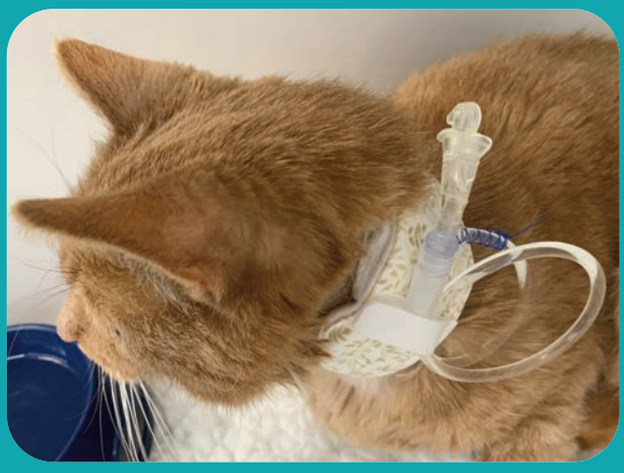

Figure 10: The feeding tube in this cat runs from the side of the neck into the oesophagus (food pipe to the stomach), allowing the veterinary team and cat carers to feed the cat and give medications. Source: Dr Sam Taylor

For more information, see International Cat Care's Cat Carer Guide to managing the cat with a feeding tube (available at icatcare.org/advice/cat-carer-guides) and accompanying video (available at youtu.be/UsLcTZ8u8Gk).

Below are a few tips regarding inappetence that may help your vet to provide the right treatment to suit your cat's needs.

- **Be specific** – you may feel the most important point to get across is that your cat 'is not eating', but be specific about the amount eaten and how often, so your vet can judge the relevance of this reduced intake.
- **Keep a food diary** – this will give your vet an accurate history of how much your cat has eaten each day. Weigh the food before you give it to your cat and then weigh any that is left, to calculate the actual amount eaten.
- **Be honest** and do not be embarrassed or feel guilty if, for example, you cannot get your cat to eat the diet prescribed or to take their medication. Your vet will be able to help and support you.

Your vet will want to treat the underlying illness causing inappetence but may also prescribe appetite stimulants, as well as medications to control nausea and pain, to help you encourage your cat to eat while waiting for results or for treatment to be effective. In some cases, it may be necessary to hospitalise a cat that is not eating; and, as we know that eating less than normal for even a few days can worsen a cat's illness, your vet may consider placing a tube to feed your cat through (see box above).

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Thank you from all of us at International Cat Care and on behalf of cats.