



Food Allergies and Elimination Diets in Cats

Allergic reactions are unpleasant for pets and exasperating for their owners. A cat suffering from an adverse food reaction, for example, might scratch, lick or bite the skin. If your cat has skin or ear problems, your veterinarian may want to investigate for a cutaneous adverse food reaction or, more simply, a “food allergy.”

There is no accurate skin or laboratory test for food allergies in pets. A cat with a food allergy looks just like one with environmental allergies and might, in fact, have both. Currently, the only way to diagnose a food allergy is by performing an elimination diet trial. The elimination diet trial is an eight-week test period when your cat can only eat the food recommended by your veterinarian. Any other food, even a tiny treat, can affect the results of the trial.

After eight weeks, your veterinarian may ask you to return to your cat’s regular food and treats to see if its symptoms return. This step is called a **dietary challenge**, and is only done after your veterinarian has reassessed your cat. The challenge is recommended because many other factors (medications, season changes) can contribute to your cat’s improvement during those eight weeks.

Frequently Asked Questions

I haven’t changed the food recently and my cat’s stool is normal; could he still have a food allergy?

Yes. In fact, most cats with food allergy have eaten their food two years or longer. And it’s very common for the allergy to affect only the skin or ears. Only a minority of cats with food allergies affecting the skin will also show gastrointestinal signs such as vomiting and diarrhea.

What treats can I give during a diet trial?

None, unless they are specifically made to accompany the prescribed diet. Don’t assume that treats with a hypoallergenic label will be suitable. Even the tiniest amount counts: the flavouring in a single monthly flea preventative pill is enough to set off an allergy.

Can I use other foods to diagnose a food allergy?

- **Pet Store:** Many store-bought foods can contain small amounts of ingredients not listed on pet food labels, making them unsuitable for the eight-week elimination diet trial.
- **Grain-free Diets:** These are not effective for elimination diet trials unless your cat only has a known grain allergy. Since your veterinarian rarely knows what your cat is allergic to when starting the diet trial, many food allergies would be missed by simply switching to a grain-free diet.
- **Vegan:** Cats are carnivores (meat eaters) so feeding them vegan diets poses significant health risks.
- **Raw Foods:** These don’t work any better than their cooked counterparts, and pose health risks to your cat and your family.

Will I need to feed the prescribed elimination trial diet forever?

In most cases, no. Even if your cat has a food allergy, your veterinarian can prescribe a diet other than the trial diet that

will work for long-term feeding. And of course, if your cat does not improve by eight weeks, there is no reason to continue the food.

Why is the diet trial so long?

It takes a long time for the skin to normalize after a food allergen is removed. A diet trial lasting eight weeks will diagnose more than 90% of food allergic cats. A trial lasting four weeks will diagnose less than 60%.

How can I find out exactly what my cat is allergic to?

Once a diagnosis of food allergy is made, your veterinarian can guide you through a sequential process (provocation) that involves adding individual suspected food allergens to the diet for up to two weeks at a time.

Which elimination diet: hydrolyzed protein or novel ingredient?

A hydrolyzed diet is made with proteins that have been broken down into smaller pieces. In the case of extensively hydrolyzed proteins, most of the protein is broken down to the level of single amino acids, which are the individual building blocks of proteins. These are less likely to trigger an allergic reaction. Hydrolyzed diets can be a good choice for cats that have been exposed to a variety of foods and treats in their lifetime or when the diet history is not fully known. Novel ingredient diets contain only ingredients that the cat has never previously eaten (although this may be difficult to ensure) and may include kibble, wet food, or home-prepared food, based on your veterinarian’s recommendation.

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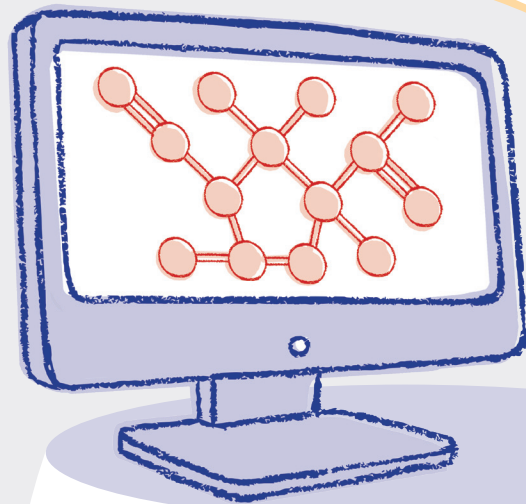
Many common foods contain proteins.



These include:

Pet Food & Treats
Meat
Wheat & Grains
Fish/
Canned Tuna
Dairy & Milk
Products

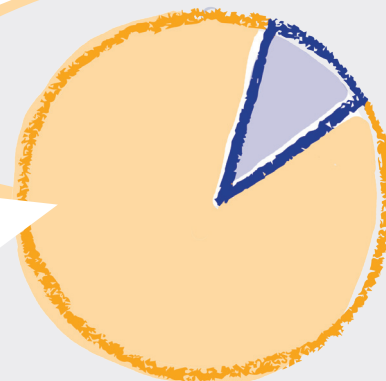
These protein molecules can be allergens for sensitive cats.



In fact

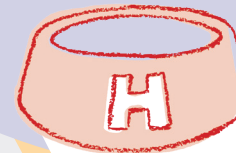
1 in 10

allergic skin reactions in cats are food related.

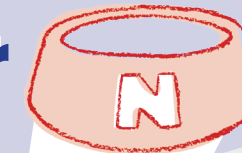


To diagnose a food allergy, an elimination diet trial is needed

Hydrolyzed Protein Diet



or



Novel Ingredient Diet

Take it slow.



Allow 10-14 days for transition.

< 60% of food-allergic cats respond in 4 weeks.



> 90% of food-allergic cats respond in 8 weeks.

A **50% to 100%**

Improvement may be seen if a food allergy is present.

Control Food Access

Feed your cat separately from other pets and don't give in to begging behaviour for treats.

These common items can be the reason for elimination diet trials to fail:



Foods used to hide pills (even if labelled hypoallergenic), toothpaste, flavoured medications, fish oils, gelatin capsules



13 Tips for Success

It takes patience and effort to complete an elimination diet trial.

- 1. Take it slow.** Don't switch to the new food overnight. It's a recipe for refusal and stomach upset. Take at least 10 to 14 days (or longer) to make the transition, starting with a very small amount of the new food on day one. Start the eight-week countdown on the first day you feed only the elimination diet.
- 2. Ask for help.** Call your veterinary team if you encounter food refusal, diarrhea, or any other problems. Cats can develop serious liver issues if they don't consume enough food. Contact your veterinarian immediately if your cat refuses the food or only eats part of his meals. Veterinary diets are guaranteed, so the food can be returned and replaced with another if your cat doesn't like it.
- 3. Reward your cat.** Make the food into a treat by putting it into your cat's cookie jar or in a food dispensing toy. If your cat gets food from the kitchen counter or table, have a stash of the food at these locations. Ensure that any container used is thoroughly cleaned and only used to hold the recommended prescribed diet. Ask your veterinary team for other tips on rewarding your cat.
- 4. Control food access.** Feed your cat separately from other pets and don't give in to begging behaviour for treats. Talk to your veterinarian about other tips for diet trial success in a multi-cat household.
- 5. Don't mix and match.** Stick to one type of food during the trial. No one food is 100% hypoallergenic for every cat, so feeding more than one type increases the chance of "missing" a food allergy.
- 6. Account for medications.** If you struggle to give oral medications to your pet, ask your veterinarian about alternatives such as injections or topically applied treatments, or even delaying the diet trial.
- 7. Let everyone know.** Your cat may have an entourage. Children, friends, and members of your family need to know about the diet trial.
- 8. Plan ahead.** Purchase the food well in advance of when you will run out.
- 9. Stay clean.** Keep the food in its original packaging, or thoroughly wash the container you use for storing the food.
- 10. No hunting.** Try to limit time outside during the diet trial so your cat won't hunt and "add" proteins to the diet.
- 11. Keep track.** Keep a calendar of your pet's symptoms, medications, and food.
- 12. Don't panic.** If you make a mistake, just record it on the calendar and keep going with the diet trial.
- 13. Go the distance.** For the sake of your cat's health, stick with the trial for the whole eight weeks.



**Make sure
EVERYONE
knows your
cat is on an
elimination
diet trial**

Your persistence, along with these tips can make a world of difference to your cat's quality of life. Call your veterinary team with questions, or to ask for help.



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