

Owners of sick cats can't be too picky on food

When they were younger, my cats would eat anything and everything, and I actually had a problem regulating their weight. I had to use timed feeders to control portions and keep them from bugging me when they were hungry.



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They would eat canned or dry food and loved to share our chicken and fish when we had leftovers. They loved almost any treat I would offer them. But now that they are older and have health issues – Shaka, 15, is over three years in remission from high-grade intestinal lymphoma, and Keiki, almost 17, has a chronic bacterial infection in her gall bladder and a pancreatic tumor – they have become the cats I have heard about for years but never personally experienced: cats that will not eat their food.

I had learned that the best way to keep cats from being picky is to offer them a small variety of things when they are young. When kittens are exposed to dry and canned foods, they tend to be more accepting of other things later in life. I always fed premium diets and fed them appropriate veterinary/prescription diets as they had health issues. Fortunately for me, this worked well until recently.

Cats can develop food aversions when they are sick, and they can associate food with not feeling well.

This creates a tremendous problem because food can be an integral part of a treatment program with many diseases. Food can even replace medications in some cases. We cannot reason with our cats and tell them to eat things that are good for them. They go with their instincts and whatever triggers their appetites.

Transitioning cats to a recommended diet is always the best course. Trying to mix small portions of the new diet with what the cat is accustomed to eating and then adding more and more of the new food over a week or two generally meets with good success. It doesn't always work with sick cats.

I have always told owners that it is more important that cats eat something rather than starve because they will not eat the recommended food for their health/condition. I also suggest supplements and dietary modifications to encourage cats to eat. However, all cat owners know that there just are some things you cannot make your cat do, and eating things he doesn't want is one of them.

I am a huge proponent of premium diets and trying to feed food from companies that have high standards of quality control and safety. The pet food industry has many niche pet foods that are geared to appeal to owners' likes, using buzz words and packaging that make people want to buy them. Unfortunately, many of these foods are manufactured in plants that have issues with contamination and uniformity of ingredients and analysis.

My opinion is that there is no best diet for every cat, and owners should discuss their feeding practices with their veterinarian and be informed about options.

So back to the reason for this article – my cats had stopped eating their regular food. I tried grain-free, high-protein and organic foods. I tried several premium maintenance diets. Each food seemed interesting to my cats for a couple of days, and that was it. I had to resort to buying some grocery store products and putting out two or three foods at a time to get them to eat. I had to rotate foods since they would like something for a day or two, then lose interest.

I hate to admit it, but one of my cats' favorite foods is a dry food from the grocery store. I swore I'd never buy it, but, desperate to satisfy my cats, I do.

The bottom line is that it really is best to avoid creating a picky eater in the first place, but if you have one, you have to try anything and everything to get your cat to eat. Prescription appetite stimulants might even be needed with sick cats. When cats don't eat, they don't have enough energy to heal.

Now that I have confessed, I won't have to hide and wear my sunglasses when I buy cat food at the grocery store. I wish my cats would eat better stuff, but I need to keep them happy and eating.

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