

## **Transitioning Your Cat From Dry Food to Wet Food**

### **Excerpts from an article by Dr. Lisa Pierson**

The best time to implement a diet change is when the cat is healthy. Trying to get an ill cat to embrace a new type of food can be problematic and a cat that is not feeling well may even develop a food aversion if they associate the new food with their discomfort.

Sick cats are often not consuming enough calories as it is, so if your cat has a decreased appetite due to illness, this is not the time to push a diet change with too much intensity.

For patients with urinary tract problems, it is extremely important for them to increase their water intake. However, because cystitis (inflammation of the bladder wall) is thought to be linked to stress – and implementing a diet change can be stressful - we need to be mindful of this and go slowly.

While you are working toward getting your cat to eat canned food, you can increase their water intake by using flavored waters such as tuna water, beef or chicken broth, clam juice, etc. You can make your own tuna water by adding 3 cups of water to a can of tuna. Mash it up and let it sit for ~15 minutes then pour the water into covered (to help maintain freshness) ice cube trays. 3 cups of water will fill two 16-cube trays. The ice cube trays can be used for other flavored liquids as well.

Prior to using, heat the ice cubes until warm and then add 1-2 TBS per meal of canned food in addition to putting some in a bowl as a separate drink of water.

Vacations and jobs that demand long working hours are often used as reasons for free-feeding dry food to cats. However, these situations have a very simple remedy.

With regard to vacations and pet-sitters, cats need to be checked on at least once each day to clean their litter box and to make sure that all is well. Let's say that you are going to be gone for 1 week. Freeze 7 meals and have your once-a-day pet-sitter put out two meals at each visit – one meal that is at 'mouse body' (warm) temperature and one that is frozen. The freshness of the frozen meal will be prolonged and your cat will be fine until your pet-sitter returns.

The same trick can be used if you are working long hours or if you live in a particularly hot climate and want to leave food out for many hours.

There are few things in life more frustrating than dealing with a finicky cat. The members of this species can be incredibly 'set in their ways' when it comes to their dietary preferences. The transition process often involves much more than just plunking down a new food item. Time, patience, and tricks are often required.

One reason that cats like dry food so much is that the kibble is coated with extremely enticing animal digest sprays which are very pleasing to a cat - making a poor quality diet very desirable to the target animal. The other issue is one of a crunchy texture which is very different from canned food. Cats are very resistant to such a drastic change in the texture of their food. If you are convinced that getting your cat off of dry food is the way to go, read on for some tips on how to accomplish this.

The key is to do it slowly and with patience and incorporate various tricks for the stubborn cats. The most important issue is actually making the change, not how fast you accomplish it. The single biggest mistake I see people make time and again is to say that their cat "won't touch" the new food and then panic and fill up the bowl with dry food. In many cases, it is simply not that easy to get cats off of dry food! So, roll up your sleeves and be prepared to patiently out-stubborn your cat.

There are two categories of cats - those that will eat canned food and those that will be extremely resistant to eating anything other than dry food. If your cat falls into the first category, lucky you. These cats will take to it with the attitude of "finally – an appropriate diet for my species." In this case, if your cat has been on all dry food, or only receives canned food as an occasional 'treat', start by feeding canned food in increasing amounts. Gradually decrease the dry, taking about a week to fully switch the cat over to 100 % canned food.

Some cats may experience softer stools during the transition. I do not worry if this happens and tend to 'ride it out'. If diarrhea results from the diet change you will either need to experiment with different canned foods or slow the transition down and do it over a period of several weeks.

For 'resistant-to-change' cats, you will need to use the normal sensation of hunger to help with the transition. For this reason, it is very important to stop free-feeding dry food. This is the first, and very critical, step. You need to establish set mealtimes. They are not going to try anything new if their bowl of dry food is in front of them 24/7. Cats do not need food available at all times. It really is okay for them to experience a hunger pain! On the other hand, do not attempt to withhold food for long periods of time (greater than 24 hours) with the hope that your cat will choose the new food.

Most cats will lose some weight during the transition to canned food. Given that a very high percentage of cats are overweight to begin with, this is a favorable result of the diet change - as long as they do not lose too much weight too fast! A cat should never lose more than 1-2% of his body weight per week - preferably closer to 1%.

\*\*\*Resign yourself to the fact that you will be very frustrated at times and you will be wasting canned food as they turn up their nose at it. \*\*\*

Here are some various tricks for the stubborn dry food addicts. Keep in mind that different tricks work on different cats:

If your cat has been eating dry food on a free-choice basis, take up the food and establish a schedule of two - three times per day feedings. It can be helpful to do just twice-daily feedings when trying to transition them. A normal, healthy hunger response after 12 hours goes a long way to convince them to try something new.

Once the cat has transitioned to canned food, I prefer to either free-feed them (if they are not too fat) or to put out a meal three times per day. Small cats in the wild eat 8-10 small meals per day. I do not worry about leaving canned food out for up to 12 hours at a time. Keep in mind that a lion is not going to eat his entire prey immediately.

When you are first teaching your cat to eat in set meal times, leave the dry food down for 20 - 30 minutes, and then remove any uneaten portion. Repeat in 8 -12 hours depending on if you are feeding 2 or 3 times per day. During the first few days of transitioning to a set schedule, you can offer canned food during the dry food meals, or in-between meals. The stubborn ones, however, will not touch it. Do not despair - all cats will eventually eat canned food if their caregiver is determined, methodical, and patient enough. Once your cat is on a schedule you will notice that he is more enthusiastic about food during his proper mealtimes and will be much more inclined to try something new.

Once you have established scheduled mealtimes, you will most likely need to start feeding a bit less at each mealtime in order to get the normal sensation of hunger to work in your favor. Again, we are trying to use the normal sensation of hunger to help us out. We are not trying to starve the cat into the diet change.

Once your cat is on a schedule of meal-feeding instead of free-feeding, try feeding a meal of canned food only. If he will not eat it - and the very stubborn ones won't - try not to get frustrated - and do not put down dry food. Try some of the other tips listed below. If he still will not eat the canned food, let him get a bit hungrier. Offer the canned again in a couple of hours - or just leave it out. Some cats will be more apt to try something new if they keep walking by it and seeing/smelling it. Try a different brand/flavor or a different 'trick'. Once it has been ~18 hours since he has eaten anything, give him just a small amount (~1/4 of a cup - or less if it is EVO) of his dry food.

- Remember to be patient. You do not have to accomplish this in a day...or a week...or even in a month.
- Exercising your cat with a tassel toy before feeding can also help stimulate his appetite.
- Instead of putting the dry food portion in his bowl, turn it into a game. Throw the dry food, one or two pieces at a time across the room so that he has to run back and forth and 'hunt' for it. Playing the 'toss the dry food portion' game will help your cat burn off calories and should stimulate his appetite so that he may be more inclined to try canned food. It is also a great way to interact with your cat which helps to relieve the stress/boredom that many indoor cats experience.
- Cats' noses are much more sensitive than ours are. They can smell the dry food in the cupboards. I suggest putting it in the refrigerator (preferable to keep the fats from getting rancid) or at least putting it in a tightly sealed container. If they can smell it, they will hold out for it. Some people recommend getting it out of your house completely, but this is not possible when you are dealing with a very stubborn cat that needs a bit of time and patience to make the transition happen.
- Pet your cat while he is in front of the food bowl. Some cats will be stimulated to eat when being petted.
- Sprinkle a very small amount of tuna - or any other favorite treat (some cats do not like fish and would prefer cooked chicken) - on the top of the canned food and then once they are eating this, start pressing it into the top of the new food. (The "light" tuna is better than the fancy white tuna because it has a stronger smell.) Be careful to decrease the amount of fish as soon as possible. Health problems can occur with a predominantly fish-based diet. Plus, you do not want to create a situation where your cat will only eat very fishy foods.
- Make sure that any refrigerated canned food is warmed up a bit. Cats prefer their food at 'mouse body' temperature.
- Try offering some cooked chicken or meat baby food or deli-meat ('cold-cuts'). One of the goals is to get your cat used to eating food that does not crunch. He needs to get used to a different texture. Also, chicken is a great source of protein to point him in the proper direction toward a high protein, low carbohydrate diet. If he eats the chicken, he may head right into eating canned food. Then again....he may not.
- Try dipping some dry food pieces in the juice from the canned food. Some cats may refuse to eat it if the dry food even touches the canned food. But if he will eat it with a bit of canned juice on it, try the 'chip and dip' trick. Scoop up a tiny bit of canned food onto the piece of dry food. Put them on a separate plate from his small portion of dry food. Some cats will eat their small portion of dry and then go investigate the dry food with a tiny bit of canned on it.

- Going one step further, try adding a few small pieces (the size of an eraser head) of the canned food to the portion of dry food. Your cat may pick around the canned food but will get used to the smell - and texture - even if he does not eat any pieces of the new food.
- Crush some dry food and sprinkle it on the top of the canned food.
- If you do not think it will upset your cat, try gently rubbing a bit of canned food or juice on the cat's gums. This may get him interested in the taste and texture of the new food - but do it gently. You do not want to make this a stressful situation and create a food aversion. (This trick is commonly used to get just-weaned kittens used to eating canned food.)
- If you do not think it will upset your cat, use your finger to put a tiny bit of canned food or juice on his paw for him to lick off. Make sure you do it without stressing your cat. Again, you do not want to create a food aversion.
- If you have a multiple cat household, some cats like to eat alone in a less stressful environment, so you may need to take these cats into a separate, quiet room.
- Try various brands and flavors of canned foods. Try brands such as Friskies, 9-Lives, Fancy Feast, etc. Many cats love the foods that are all by-products and turn up their noses at the 'higher end' foods like Merrick, Wellness, Nature's Variety, etc. The initial goal is just to get your cat used to eating canned food and not dry kibble. And keep in mind that it is better to feed non-premium canned food than any dry food because, even though they are often made up of by-products, they have the Big Three covered: 1) high in water, 2) usually low in carbohydrates, 3) animal-based proteins – not plant-based.

These are just a few tricks that you can try. Different tricks work on different cats. The key is to be patient. Some cats can take months to transition, but most will not take this long. It really is worth the effort when it means the chance at a more healthy and long life for your kitty!