

Successfully Communicating a Nutritional Recommendation



The first steps in patient evaluation begins with a health screen. This screen should include: signalment (breed, age, gender, neuter status and activity), a complete history including a diet history and a complete physical examination including body weight, and body (BCS) and muscle condition (MCS) scores. When indicated by history or physical exam, a complete blood count, serum chemistry and urinalysis may need to be evaluated as well.

The diet history should determine all types of food fed (including treats), the feeding method (how much, how often), who is responsible for feeding the pet, and any other sources of calories (no matter how small or seemingly insignificant). Excellent communication strategies can build rapport with clients and elicit accurate information about the patient and their environment.

Incorporate the following into every nutritional conversation (try open ended questions)

- Tell me everything that your pet eats in a day
- What brand of food do you feed your pet (try to get specific name)? Have pet parents take a photo or bring the bag in during the visit.
- Do you feed moist or dry or both?
- How do you feed your pet – feeding method (how much, how often)? How do you measure the food amounts (for example, verify cup size)?
- What type of human foods snacks or treats does your pet enjoy? If so, what and how often?
- Do you give your pet any supplements?
- Is your pet taking any medications, including chewable medications? If so, obtain name and dosage. How do you administer medications? (any foods used for pilling)
- What type of chew toys does your pet play with?
- Does your pet have access to ANY other sources of food (other pets, neighbor, trash, family member, etc.)?

Obtaining a complete diet history is a key nutritional diagnostic tool. A diet history also provides key insights to potential barriers for client compliance, guides client discussion, and provides the foundation for developing the nutritional program for the pet.

The veterinary healthcare team is responsible for communicating the importance of nutrition in pets. Proper communication results in compliance with the recommendation by the team. Compliance is the measure of whether the pets seen in the hospital actually receive the care that the healthcare team and the profession believe is best for them. Is the recommendation that was made for the patient by the veterinarian being followed by the owner?

Recommendations

Recommendation involves taking all the diagnostic information (history, physical exam, body weight, BCS, MCS etc.) into account and making a specific recommendation each time. When the patient is thriving and eating a great food, validate what is going well including the name and type of the current food. When a diet change is indicated, make the recommendation(s) specific as well. All diet recommendations should include:

- Name of food(s)
- How ***much*** to feed of the recommended food
- How ***often*** to feed the recommended food
- A follow up plan. Remember to put this in writing for the client. The healthcare team should then follow up with the client by calling to see how the transition is going, and ask what other questions the owner may have.

The veterinary healthcare team member must communicate and educate the owner as to why the recommendation has been made. This helps to reinforce the recommendation, conveys the value of nutrition and allows for understanding on the part of the owner. This education is crucial to a successful nutritional program. This discussion is aimed at ensuring the client understands the recommendation, why it was made, the impact of the disease condition (if applicable) on the pet, and the treatment plan. If any of these are missed or misunderstood, the pet may not receive the care intended by the healthcare team.

Follow Through

As mentioned, the final piece to successful communication is follow through. Follow through involves phone calls and recheck appointments - depending on the nutritional program. The first recheck appointment should be made **before** the client leaves the hospital. The veterinary technician should call the client in three to five days to discuss feeding transition, treating, the exercise regimen, and to help trouble shoot or field any other questions that may have arisen since the hospital visit and recommendation.

Be sure to weigh the pet and obtain a body condition and muscle condition score at **every visit** and record the information in the patient's medical record. It is helpful to use the same scale and chart the findings for the client. Body and muscle condition scoring are important to assess a patient's fat stores and muscle mass.

Several specific recommendations need to be communicated to insure a successful nutritional program:

1. Recommend a *specific food* and calculate the initial feeding amount.
2. Emphasize the importance of consistent measuring and ensure using a specific measuring cup or weigh the food amount each day.
3. If the client wants to offer treats, incorporate appropriate recommendations (\leq 5-10% of total intake) and adjust the caloric intake accordingly.
4. Offer alternative's other than food to reward or bond with their pet.
5. ***Evaluate, adjust, communicate, and encourage on a consistent basis.***
6. Recommend appropriate exercise for the pet.
7. Celebrate success!