

Picky, Finicky, and/or Discretionary Eaters

Practicing veterinarians often hear from their clients that their dog or cat is a picky eater. There are pets that are just finicky about their food, but there are far less finicky eaters than those that have a medical problem or are just simply overfed and not hungry.



The first place to begin is a thorough patient history and complete physical examination by a veterinarian with appropriate diagnostic testing if indicated. Multiple disease conditions include kidney disease, liver or pancreatic disease, dental disease, gastrointestinal disease and cancer often cause decrease appetite and must be addressed.

A vital part of the physical exam is a body condition score (BCS) and muscle condition score (MCS). If the body condition score is over 6 out of 9 (ideal BCS is 4-5/9) the pet's picky behavior may just be lack of hunger. For example, if food is left out when the owner is not home (a common mistake that often leads to obesity) the pet may be snacking all day long and be picky about food offered to them simply because they are not hungry. This is by far the most common cause of a "picky eater". If the pet is being overfed at meal times, the owner may mistakenly assume the pet is picky or doesn't like the food when in fact the pet is consuming a sufficient amount of food. The tendency for a pet owner to "add something" to the complete and balanced diet to encourage food intake for a pet in optimal body condition or an overweight pet must be avoided. This practice often leads to over feeding, unbalancing the overall nutrient intake since the "coax foods" are typically not complete and balanced, and often perpetuates the discretionary behavior where the pet continues "pick out" certain items.

If an underlying medical condition has been ruled-out as a cause for hyporexia (low calorie intake) causing the pet to be underweight (BCS less than 4/9) a more caloric dense food can be considered to entice a pet to consume more calories especially if the pet does not consume large volumes at a time. Increasing meal frequency may help certain pets who are underweight and need to increase daily caloric intake. If necessary "top dressing" a food with small amounts (less than 10% of daily caloric intake) of healthy human foods (e.g. cottage cheese, lean poultry or meats) may help encourage intake. A sprinkle of Parmesan cheese provided there is no medical contraindication for the pet can also entice some picky eaters. If the pet will not consume adequate amounts of a complete and balanced commercial pet food to maintain appropriate body weight, referral to a veterinary nutrition to explore options such as a complete and balanced home-cooked recipe is recommended.

With today's high quality, high calorie foods and owner's busy schedules, many picky eaters are simply overfed. Those that are finicky and losing weight need to be screened for medical diseases by a veterinarian as soon as possible. Early disease detection often yields a better prognosis and treatment plan.