

Best Methods for Transitioning to a New Food & Preventing Overfeeding

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When bringing home a new bag of pet food, it can be tempting to quickly fill up the pet’s feeding bowl in the excitement of having them enjoy a new food. However, it is important to remember that most dogs and cats do not regularly change their diets, and that sudden differences in dietary moisture, fat, fiber, and even total calories can result in stool changes, potentially leading to diarrhea. Similarly, this is one of the main reasons why human babies and young children also must be slowly introduced to new foods.

Feeding a New Food - Changes in Nutrient Make Up

Three food nutrients, moisture, fat, and fiber, commonly have the largest effect on transition feeding and diarrhea and must be carefully controlled during diet changes. Diarrhea occurs if stool moisture becomes excessive, either due to inadequate water absorption from the intestinal tract or increased water secretion or diffusion into the intestinal tract. If one considers the nutrients listed above, one can begin to appreciate why stool changes can be seen with sudden dietary changes. For example, an increase in dietary moisture, such as when going from a dry food (~10% moisture) to a wet/canned food (~75% moisture), can result in softer stools if the intestinal tract is not allowed adequate time to adapt to the increase in dietary moisture. Another nutrient that can impact a pet’s stool is dietary fat. When a sudden increase in dietary fat is made, fat digestive enzymes theoretically may not have adequate time to upregulate or increase, resulting in poor digestion and movement of undigested fats into the colon where bacteria create what is known as hydroxylated fatty acids (unabsorbed fatty acids that have been altered by the action of enzymes present in the gut). These hydroxylated fatty acids stimulate colonic water secretion, which in turn results in diarrhea.¹ Finally, changes in dietary fiber can also have a large impact on stool consistency. Dietary fiber can be classified into two categories, soluble and insoluble fiber. As the name implies, soluble fibers are soluble in water and tend to draw (or retain) moisture into feces. Therefore, feeding a new food with more soluble fibers, such as from pectins found in fruit ingredients or gums used to give canned foods a pleasant texture, can result in a softer stool.

All of these dietary changes can result in undesired stool changes if a new food is rapidly introduced, but can be avoided or minimized by using a transition period in which the new food is slowly introduced while the old food is phased out. The transition period required will vary based on the degree of differences between the new and old foods as well as individual pet differences. In general, one week is a good minimum length of time to transition to a new food, as outlined in the table below. If at any step in the transition, the pet experiences undesirable stool changes, the previous transition step should be extended for at least an additional two days. If the pet continues to have undesired stool changes, especially if poor appetite preceded the diet change, a veterinarian should be consulted to ensure that no underlying problem(s) need to be addressed.

Feeding the Appropriate Amount

In addition to changes in nutrients, feeding excessive calories can result in undesired stool changes. Overfeeding can result in “osmotic diarrhea” in which undigested food within the intestinal tract results in the diffusion of water into the gut.² This increase in water results in the characteristic diarrhea seen when a pet is switched to a more energy dense food. Energy densities of pet foods can range from ~300 kcals/cup up to ~600 kcals/cup. Therefore, it is important to adjust the volume of the new food to match the pet’s current caloric intake. For example, if the pet was previously fed 2 cups per day of a food providing 300 kcals/cup (for a total of 600 kcals/day)*, a new food providing 400 kcals/cup should be fed at 1 ½ cups per day† to provide an equivalent amount of calories and prevent overfeeding (see example in table below).

New Food Transition Table

Day	Amount to feed of Previous Food	Example* Previous feeding of 2 cups of 300 kcal/cup food	Amount to feed of New Food	Example† New feeding of 1 ½ cups of 400 kcal/cup food
1 & 2	75% of calories	1 ½ cups	25% of calories	3/8 cup
3 & 4	50% of calories	1 cup	50% of calories	3/4 cup
5 & 6	25% of calories	1/2 cup	75% of calories	1 ½ cup
7	0% of calories	---	100% of calories	1 ½ cups

With the right food, transitional period, and amount to feed, your pet’s stool should remain consistent with dietary changes. If you have questions about transitioning your pet onto its new Natura food, please speak with your veterinarian, your local independent retailer and/or a Natura Product Advisor at 800-532-7261.

References:

1. Young SK, Norton S. Metabolism of hydroxyl fatty acids in dogs with steatorrhea secondary to experimentally produced intestinal blind loops. *J Lipid Research* 1968; 9: 487-491.
2. D. Davenport, et al. “Gastrointestinal and Exocrine Pancreatic Disease” in *Small Animal Clinical Nutrition*, 4th Ed, Hand ed. Walsworth Publishing Company, Marceline, Missouri, 2000, pgs. 725-810.

