

# Loss of Appetite in Cats – Causes, Symptoms & Treatment

 [www.cat-world.com.au/anorexia-loss-of-appetite-in-cats.html](http://www.cat-world.com.au/anorexia-loss-of-appetite-in-cats.html)

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## Loss of appetite at a glance:

- Anorexia is the medical term for loss of appetite, it is a symptom rather than a disease and a sign that something is not right with your cat.
- There are many causes why your cat may lose his appetite from sickness, fussiness, and stress.
- Diagnosing the cause will be necessary, your veterinarian will perform baseline tests, plus some additional tests depending on his index of suspicion.
- Treatment depends on the underlying cause but will include supportive care such as appetite stimulants, anti-nausea medications, and nutritional support, if necessary.

Anorexia is the loss of appetite for food. It is not a disease, rather it is a symptom of a disease or underlying problem. It may begin as a decrease in appetite at first, moving onto a complete refusal to eat.

If your cat has not eaten for more than 12 hours, seek veterinary advice. Cats can quickly develop hepatic lipidosis which is life-threatening. Hepatic lipidosis is caused when a cat becomes anorexic and the body begins to use fat stores as fuel. These fat stores are sent to the liver, to be broken down to supply nutrients. Unfortunately, the liver sometimes becomes overwhelmed and is unable to process this fat as quickly as necessary, leading to a build-up of fat in the liver, which interferes with normal liver function.

## Causes:

It is very common for a sick cat to lose his appetite. Reasons can be divided into fussiness, stress or sickness.

- Fussiness could be because of a change in your cat's diet, unclean food bowls, having to share food bowls with other cats, an unsuitable location of food bowls.
- Stress is a very common cause of cats to lose their appetite. Moving house, being bullied by another household cat (or dog).
- Medical. There are many reasons why a sick cat loses his appetite.

A cat in pain, feeling sick, or feeling well will often lose his appetite. Anorexia is very common with the sick cat, there are potentially dozens of possible causes. Some of which include:

## Medical:

- **Abscess** – A walled-off collection of blood and other debris within the tissue. Often caused by a bite.

- **Addison's disease** – Insufficient secretion of adrenal hormones.
- **Anemia** – Reduced number of red blood cells due to a number of factors such as disease or blood loss.
- **Bacterial infections.**
- **Certain medications.**
- **Coccidiosis** – Protozoal infection, most commonly seen in kittens under six months of age.
- **Dental or mouth pain** (gingivitis, tooth abscess, stomatitis).
- **Feline diabetes** – A condition in which the pancreas doesn't make enough insulin or because cells fail to respond to insulin.
- **Gastrointestinal ulcers.**
- **Glomerulonephritis** – Inflammation of the glomeruli, which are tiny filtering units in the kidneys.
- **Haemobartonellosis** – Infection caused by one of two "mycoplasma" (a type of bacteria) which attach themselves to the walls of red blood cells causing destruction.
- **Heartworm** – Parasitic worm infection of the heart.
- **Histoplasmosis** – Fungal infection primarily affecting the lungs and gastrointestinal system.
- **Hypercalcemia** – High levels of calcium in the blood.
- **Injury or trauma.**
- **Intestinal obstruction.**
- **Ingestion of poison.**
- **Kidney failure** – Either acute (sudden onset) or chronic (slow and progressive), kidney failure is a medical condition in which kidney function begins to fail, leading to a build-up of toxins in the body.
- **Nausea** – A cat who is feeling nauseous will be reluctant to eat.
- **Neoplasia** (abnormal cell growth).
- **Pancreatitis** – Inflammation of the pancreas.
- **Portosystemic shunt** – Abnormality of the liver caused by the abnormal development of blood vessels draining into the intestinal tract.
- **Pyometra** – Bacterial infection of the uterus.
- **Stress** (some possible causes of stress include; moving house, loss of companion, new pet/person in the house, hospitalisation, being boarded)
- **Vaccinations** – They can make your cat feel a tiny bit unwell for a short period of time. Your cat's appetite should return within a day or two.
- **Viral infection** (Feline Herpesvirus, Feline Panleukopenia Virus, Calicivirus, FeLV and more)

## Diagnosis:

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As you can see, there are quite a lot of possible causes of anorexia in cats. Your veterinarian will perform a complete physical examination of your cat and obtain a medical history from you.

Additional symptoms may give clues as to the cause of anorexia.

Diagnostic tests:

- Baseline tests (complete blood count, biochemical profile, urinalysis) to check for metabolic disorders, inflammatory/infectious diseases or neoplasia.
- Physical examination to check for wounds, abscesses, internal or external masses. Abdominal palpitation to feel the size and shape of the organs.
- A complete oral examination to look for gingival or dental disease, check for a foreign body.
- Abdominal x-ray and or ultrasound to check for abnormalities in organ size and shape, gastrointestinal obstruction or neoplasia.
- Thoracic (chest) x-ray and or ultrasound to check for abnormalities in organ size and shape, cardiac disease, inflammatory infections/diseases.
- Fecal exam to check for parasites.

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## How can I get my anorexic cat to eat?

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It is so easy for a sick cat to lose his appetite, but there are ways you can try to encourage him to eat.

### Food

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- Heating up food can help release the odours, this can be enough to stimulate his appetite. Food should be heated up to around body temperature (think the temperature of a mouse).
- Offer him highly palatable food such as tuna, prawns or shredded chicken.
- Try hand feeding him, it may be the push he needs to eat.
- Feed him small amounts of food but often.
- Syringe feed your cat. This involves removing the fine needle from a syringe, adding some moist food and syringing into the cat's mouth.
- Add a little tuna juice to his food.
- Place some grated cheese on top of his food.

### Food bowls

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- Place the food bowls in a position which is easy for your cat to access. A cat who is in pain, for example, may find it difficult to bend over and eat his food. Raising it can make it easier and more comfortable for him.
- Make sure his food bowls are clean.

### Other

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- A cat with a blocked nose (common with cat flu) has problems smelling. Wipe away nasal discharge regularly and use a humidifier which can help the discharge drain from the nose.
- Make sure your cat is feeling safe and comfortable. If he is not feeling well, he may need some space on his own (away from the noise and other pets).
- If he is sick enough to require hospitalisation, speak to your veterinarian about the possibility of making visits to him. I had a hospitalised cat who wouldn't eat for the veterinarian, but I was able to hand-feed him during visits.
- Speak to your veterinarian about a nutritional supplement such as Nutrigel. This high-

calorie product is squeezed into the mouth and can a) help to sustain your cat while his appetite is down and b) kick-start his appetite.

## Treatment:

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The goal of treatment is to find and treat the underlying cause and provide supportive care. This may include:

- **Encouraging your cat to eat** – Obviously getting nourishment into your cat is important. Offering small amounts of strong tasting food such as tuna or a highly palatable paste such as Nutrigel.
- **Appetite stimulants** – These may be prescribed to encourage your cat to eat. Mirtazapine an anti-depressant which can also stimulate the appetite. Maropitant citrate is an anti-emetic (vomiting) medication which can also relieve nausea, which is a common reason why cats lose their appetite. Mirtazapine and Maropitant can be used together in some cases. Other appetite-stimulating medications include cyproheptadine (Periactin) an antihistamine and corticosteroids such as prednisone.
- **Tube feeding** – If the above methods don't work and your cat is still not eating, your veterinarian may have to tube feed your cat until his appetite comes back. A feeding tube is a plastic tube which is placed either through the nose (nasoesophageal feeding tube), through the skin of the neck and into the esophagus (**esophagostomy feeding tube**), or through the wall of the abdomen and into the stomach (**gastrostomy feeding tube**). A short general anesthetic is required to insert the esophagostomy or gastrostomy feeding tubes. Soft and watery food is then placed into the feeding tube to provide your cat adequate nourishment until his appetite returns. A cat with a feeding tube may be treated in-house, or once the tube is inserted, may be treated at home.
- **Antibiotics** to treat bacterial infections.
- **Supportive care** – Such as fluid therapy to treat dehydration and anti-nausea medications.

## Non-medical causes of anorexia:

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If an underlying medical cause isn't the cause, it is important to look at other possible reasons your cat is not eating. There are a number of possible causes including:

### Dirty food bowls

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Nobody wants to eat from a dirty food bowl and that goes for our cats too. Not only do they pose a risk due to old food stuck to the sides becoming contaminated, they also smell. Wash food bowls in hot soapy water at least once a day.

### Sharing food bowls

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Cats are not social eaters, they prefer to eat on their own. Not only that, but it is quite possible for a more dominant or food obsessed cat to hog the bowl. Each cat should have his own food bowl.

## **Sudden changes in diet**

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There's a school of thought that cats should be fed the same food every day and it's not good to swap foods around. I have always given my cats a variety of foods including canned, dry and raw which means they are less likely to go on hunger strike.

Cats who have only been fed one type of food can be quite sensitive to changes in diet. If you do want to (or need to) change his diet, do so over a few days. Start by adding a small amount of the new food to his regular food and slowly increase the new food while decreasing the old. A loss of appetite is often one of the first signs that your cat is feeling unwell. Always be alert and aware of how much your cat is eating and seek veterinary attention if he does stop.

## **Food bowl location**

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Firstly, your cat's food and water bowls should not be located in close proximity to their litter trays. Location is important. Bowls should be located in an easy to access area, but out of the way of high traffic. If your cat has to navigate three flights of stairs to locate his bowl, or pass the resident dog who bails him up, you have a potential problem.

## **Food left out for too long**

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Fresh food (including canned) can go off quickly, particularly in warmer months. Don't dump a huge mound of fresh food in his bowl and leave it there all day. If the food doesn't smell safe, your cat won't eat it. It is better to feed a small amount of food, more often. Remove and discard uneaten fresh food after 20 minutes.

## **Stressful associations**

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Being bailed up by a dog, another household cat or your toddler while eating can create negative associations with feeding. Cats need to feel safe and calm during mealtimes.