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## **Making a successful transition to a prescription diet**

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Several conditions that cats acquire over the course of their lives may require the feeding of a prescription diet. Prescription diets are formulations specifically designed for specific diseases, such as chronic kidney disease, diabetes mellitus and hyperthyroidism. In some cases, feeding one of these diets to your cat may be the most important treatment our veterinary team prescribes. In nearly all cases in which a prescription diet is recommended, feeding the new food exclusively is necessary for your cat to receive the full benefits of the diet. In most cases, when these diets are prescribed, they are intended to be fed to your cat indefinitely. Because the diets are typically recommended as a long-term treatment, it is important to take measures to maximize the likelihood that your cat will accept the new diet as part of his or her daily routine. Many cats do not accept sudden changes in routine, like a change in diet, and they protest with a “hunger-strike.”

There are some simple measures you can take to ease the dietary transition for your cat and ensure that he or she will not only initially accept the new food, but continue to eat the new food consistently once the novelty of the new taste fades.

The first rule of thumb is that every change (dietary or other) made to your cat’s routine should be done gradually. Dietary changes are best made over at least one to two weeks, but may require as long as three to four weeks. Changing the diet too abruptly is likely to result in immediate refusal of the new diet, especially if the taste is different than the old diet. Another problem commonly encountered with an abrupt diet change is an initial enthusiastic acceptance of the new food, followed shortly thereafter by refusal of the new food, as the novelty of the new taste dwindles.

The second rule of thumb is that a diet change is always easier to make if your cat is fed on a fixed schedule, two to three times per day. You can change your cat’s feeding schedule by making food available for only one hour, two to three times daily. It can take approximately one to two weeks until your cat is accustomed to the new routine of scheduled feedings.

In most cases, this change in the feeding schedule can be made for other cats in the house, too, provided that your other cats do not have any medical conditions that would make this type of schedule inappropriate for them.

Once your cat is eating on a regular schedule, you can start to make the change to the prescription diet. Start by reducing the amount of old food by 10 to 25% and replace this food with a small amount of the new food. Offer both the old and the new food in your cat's usual food bowl. You can also try to mix the two foods thoroughly (some cats will accept the new food this way, but for others it is better to leave the foods separate within the same bowl). After an hour, take up the food bowls until the next feeding. At the next feeding, repeat the process, always providing fresh, new food at each meal. Once the new diet is familiar to your cat (usually within two to three days), he or she should start eating the mixture readily. Once your cat appears to be used to the new mixture, start to decrease the amount of the old diet fed by a small amount each day (1 teaspoon to 1 tablespoon per day), while increasing the amount of the new diet until the change is complete. Using this strategy, the change should be completed over a period of one to two weeks; but if your cat is a particularly finicky eater, making the change over three to four weeks might be a better option.