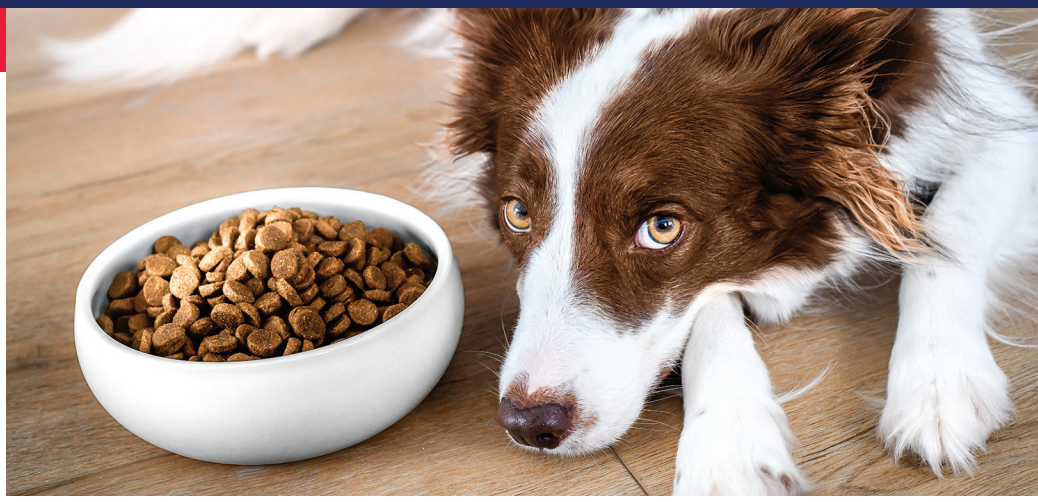
PET OWNER HANDOUT



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How to Make a Food Trial Worthwhile

An elimination food trial (ie, cutting out all foods a pet might be allergic to for a period of time to see if their symptoms improve) is a reliable, definitive way to diagnose food allergies in pets, but to be a useful test, it requires that the pet eat *only* a hypoallergenic prescription food during the trial period.[1-3]

Learn more about this essential diagnostic test to ensure your pet's food trial is successful.

Food Allergies in Pets

A food allergy is an inappropriate immune system reaction that occurs in response to a regular dietary ingredient. Animal proteins (eg, chicken, beef, dairy) are the most common triggers for food allergies, but proteins in carbohydrate sources (eg, wheat) can cause allergies as well.[4] Symptoms of food allergies typically include itching, rashes, and/or ear infections.[5] Some pets may also experience gastrointestinal signs such as diarrhea and vomiting.[6]

Diagnosing Food Allergies

Food allergies can look similar to environmental allergies, making them hard to diagnose by examination alone. Using your pet's blood, hair, and/or saliva to test for food allergies is unreliable; thus, those methods cannot be used for diagnosis.[2] A strict food trial with a therapeutic food is the only way to definitively diagnose food allergies.[2,3]

Food Trial Overview

During a food trial, pets must be fed a therapeutic food for ≥8 weeks. Although pets cannot eat anything but the specified food during this time, you can work with your veterinarian to find out if there are compatible treats you can feed your pet. In this ≥8-week time frame, >90% of pets with food allergies will show improvement.[1] During the food trial, the slightest exposure in any form to the previous food that may have been causing allergy signs (see ***Potential Allergen Sources to Consider During a Food Trial***) can trigger allergies, requiring a restart of the trial.

Potential Allergen Sources to Avoid During a Food Trial

- Treats (unless compatible treats are approved by your veterinarian)
- Table food
- Other pets' food
- Bones, rawhides, pig ears, etc.
- Dental chews
- Flavored toothpaste
- Flavored supplements
- Flavored medications, including some oral parasite preventives. Unflavored or topical alternatives may be suggested by your veterinarian for the duration of the food trial.

If a pet has shown improvement by the end of trial period, the final step of the food trial is to feed the pet some of their regular food to verify that their improvement was not coincidental. The pet is diagnosed with food allergy if their allergy symptoms return.

Food Selection for Trial Success

Although over-the-counter pet foods may be marked as "hypoallergenic" or "limited ingredient," studies have shown that pet foods available without veterinary authorization are often contaminated with proteins not listed on the ingredient list.[3,7] Veterinary therapeutic foods are the safest bet for ensuring your pet gets *only* the ingredients intended.

There are 2 types of therapeutic foods used in elimination trials: novel ingredient foods and hydrolyzed protein foods.

- Novel ingredient foods, such as Hill's Prescription Diet d/d or Derm Complete, are made with ingredients your pet is unlikely to have ever eaten before (eg, duck, venison) and is therefore unlikely to have a reaction to. If your pet has eaten foods containing these ingredients in the past, including treats, these foods cannot be used for an elimination food trial.
- Hydrolyzed protein foods, such as Hill's Prescription Diet z/d or z/d Low Fat, have proteins that have been broken down so the immune system should not be able to detect them.

Your veterinarian will help you determine which of the Hill's Prescription Diet foods are best for your pet.

Tips for Avoiding Pitfalls

For a food trial to successfully help determine if the cause of your pet's allergies is related to a particular ingredient in their food, everything that goes in your pet's mouth must be controlled during the trial period. Although this may feel like a big undertaking, some careful preparation can have you and your pet settling into the new routine in no time:

- **Find treat alternatives.** The canned version of your pet's elimination food can serve as treats and be used to help administer medications. Your veterinarian can suggest other treat alternatives, if needed.
- **Make a medication plan.** Many medications, including some types of oral parasiticides, contain added ingredients for flavoring. These flavorings should be avoided during a food trial, making it imperative to have a discussion with your veterinarian about alternative medications to use during a food trial.
- **Avoid accidental exposure to human food.** Keep pets in another room during mealtimes if you have young children that may drop food. In addition, ensure all trash and recycling bins are secure.
- **Organize other pets.** Avoid food sharing between pets by feeding each pet separately and picking up food bowls after meals.
- **What they eat outside counts.** Watch your dog on walks to prevent food scavenging. Put a bell on cats to thwart hunting efforts.
- **Transition slowly.** Switching food quickly can lead to food aversion or an upset stomach. Slowly mix in the new food with the old food over 5 to 7 days to gradually transition to the new food.
- **Make sure everyone is on board.** Tell children, guests, neighbors, dogwalkers, and daycare workers about the trial—everyone who interacts with your pet needs to know the new rules.

Conclusion

Changing your approach to how you feed your pet can feel difficult at first, especially if fun aspects you enjoy together like training with treats are a part of your routine. However, elimination food trials can be incredibly useful for learning more about your pet's health and, in the long-run, may lead to your pet feeling better every day.

References

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