

# Food Trials in Pets: Tips for a Successful Transition

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## Why Does My Pet Need a Food Trial?

If an elimination food trial has been recommended for your pet, it is likely that your veterinarian is trying to rule out a food allergy. Common signs of food allergies can overlap with signs of other conditions, but they include non-seasonal itching, hair loss, chronic ear problems, and gastrointestinal signs. Elimination food trials serve as the only way to determine if your pet's symptoms are due to a food allergy, as there is no simple "allergy test" that can provide reliable results for diagnosing a food allergy.

## What Is a Food Trial?

A food trial, or elimination diet trial, involves the strict adherence to a specific food to rule out or diagnose food sensitivities in your pet. Your veterinarian will help you choose an appropriate food that should be fed strictly for the duration of the food trial (usually 8-12 weeks). During this period, pet owner compliance is essential, as deterring from the food may expose your pet to an ingredient they may be allergic to and therefore disrupt the food trial. Similar to a human with a food allergy, exposure to even a small amount of an ingredient can elicit dramatic symptoms in a pet. Observation of your pet's symptoms during this period is critical and will help your veterinarian interpret the results of the food trial at the end of the trial period.

## What Type of Food Might My Veterinarian Recommend?

Your veterinarian will recommend a therapeutic food for your pet's food trial. Food sensitivities in pets are commonly caused by the proteins in the food, such as chicken, beef, and dairy.<sup>1</sup> Wheat and other ingredients are less commonly reported as allergens but can still occur.<sup>1</sup> The food your veterinarian recommends will likely fall into 1 of 2 categories:

- ▶ Limited ingredient, novel protein food: Novel protein foods, such as Hill's Prescription Diet d/d foods, contain a protein source that is less commonly found in pet food; therefore, it is possible your pet has never been exposed to it (ie, a novel ingredient). Novel

proteins have a lower chance of inciting an allergic response. It is important to understand that what is novel for one pet may not be novel for another, so a thorough diet history should be evaluated to determine if the ingredient is novel for the specific patient.

- ▶ Hydrolyzed protein food: Hydrolyzed protein foods, such as Hill's Prescription Diet z/d food, contain proteins that have been broken down (hydrolyzed) into very small fragments to help avoid detection by the immune system.

Successful elimination trials can be performed with both types of food, and your veterinarian will help determine which is the best choice for your pet.

## How Can Therapeutic Food Benefit My Pet?

Choosing a therapeutic food for your pet's food trial offers a myriad of benefits. For the purposes of an elimination trial, Hill's Prescription Diet foods are specifically formulated for pets with food allergies and offer a safe and reliable means of ruling out (or in) an adverse food reaction by meeting all of your pet's nutritional needs and leaving out potentially problematic ingredients. For pets with food allergies, undergoing food trials with therapeutic food can result in resolution or improvement in their symptoms, often leading to a long-term food change.

**Hill's Prescription Diet foods are specifically formulated for pets with food allergies and offer a safe and reliable means of ruling out (or in) an adverse food reaction.**

Some pet store foods are labeled as limited-ingredient foods, but because of less stringent manufacturing standards, these foods can include trace ingredients of substances your pet may be allergic to and therefore illicit an allergic response.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, it is important to perform a food trial with the recommended therapeutic food. Thanks to their team of PhD nutritionists and veterinarians, Hill's Prescription Diets are clinically tested and backed by science, making them a great choice for your pet's lifelong nutritional needs.

### What Else Do I Need to Eliminate from My Pet's Food?

Commercial treats, bones, biscuits, rawhides, and other pet products often include potential allergens that could offset the efforts of a successful food trial. In addition, many human foods and even chewable pet medications contain ingredients that could incite an allergic reaction in some patients. For this reason, all foods and treats that are not approved under your chosen elimination food should remain off-limits. If your pet routinely receives flavored or chewable medication (such as monthly flea and tick prevention), consult with your veterinarian regarding other options during this sensitive trial period. Exposure to table scraps, flavored medications, or another pet's food may all cause setbacks during this trial period. If you know your pet has consumed something other than the trial food, consult your veterinarian to discuss extending the length of the trial for more accurate results.

### How Should I Transition My Pet to Therapeutic Food?

Transitioning your pet to an elimination food and therapeutic food can be achieved in a few easy steps. To minimize the possibility of gastrointestinal upset and other reactions, transition should occur progressively over the course of 1 week:

- ▶ On days 1 and 2, offer 75% of your pet's old food mixed with 25% of the new food.
- ▶ On days 3 and 4, offer 50% of the old food with 50% of the new food.
- ▶ On days 5 and 6, offer 25% of the old food with 75% of the new food.
- ▶ On day 7 and beyond, offer 100% of the new food.

During the food trial, try keeping a symptom log (see below) for your pet. Write down any appetite concerns, signs of upset stomach, level of itching, signs of skin lesions, etc. This will help your veterinary team evaluate the efficacy of the food trial. If there are any significant concerns during the food trial, please do not hesitate to contact your veterinary team immediately.

### What Happens at the End of the Elimination Trial?

At the end of the designated food trial period, a follow-up appointment should be made with your veterinarian to discuss your pet's symptoms. Please bring your symptom log with you. If your pet has shown improvement on the selected food, your veterinarian may recommend challenging your pet with their original food to watch for a relapse of symptoms. If your pet's symptoms return with their old food and resolve with the new food, your pet can then be definitively diagnosed with food allergies. From there, your veterinarian may suggest keeping your pet on the trial food long-term or introducing your pet to certain dietary ingredients in a controlled manner in an effort to determine the specific foods your pet can or cannot tolerate.

### Other Considerations

- ▶ Pinpointing food sensitivities to specific ingredients can be challenging and not always feasible. However, many pets with food sensitivities experience an improvement in clinical signs during their food trial, making their therapeutic food a suitable, long-term choice.
- ▶ Oftentimes, pets that deal with allergy symptoms may be on certain medications to manage these symptoms. It is imperative to discuss with your veterinarian if any medications should be discontinued for the duration of the trial.
- ▶ There are many causes of allergic disease beyond food allergies. If the elimination trial does not reveal the source of allergic disease, your veterinarian will discuss other diagnostic tests to try to pinpoint the cause of your pet's symptoms.
- ▶ All family members, visitors, and pet caretakers will need to comply with the food trial. Consider keeping pets out of the dining area during mealtimes to avoid inadvertent consumption of unregulated food.
- ▶ Cats should stay indoors for the duration of the food trial to eliminate complications from hunting.
- ▶ Keeping tabs on your pet's clinical signs with a symptom log during their food trial can help evaluate their response to therapy.

### References

1. Clinical Nutrition Team. What every pet owner should know about food allergies. Tufts Clinical Nutrition Service website. <https://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/2017/01/food-allergies>. Published January 27, 2017. Accessed July 29, 2022.
2. Raditic DM, Remillard RL, Tater KC. ELISA testing for common food antigens in four dry dog foods used in dietary elimination trials. *J Anim Physiol Anim Nutr (Berl)*. 2011;95(1):90-97.

## Symptom Log

### Week 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Symptoms observed (level of itching [1-10], stool quality and frequency, skin lesions, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

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### Week 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Symptoms observed (level of itching [1-10], stool quality and frequency, skin lesions, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

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### Week 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Symptoms observed (level of itching [1-10], stool quality and frequency, skin lesions, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

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### Week 4 \_\_\_\_\_

Symptoms observed (level of itching [1-10], stool quality and frequency, skin lesions, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

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### Week 5 \_\_\_\_\_

Symptoms observed (level of itching [1-10], stool quality and frequency, skin lesions, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

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### Week 6 \_\_\_\_\_

Symptoms observed (level of itching [1-10], stool quality and frequency, skin lesions, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

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## ADDITIONAL NOTES FROM MY VETERINARY TEAM

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