

Making the Switch from Free-Feeding to Portioned Meals

Brought to you by Hill's Pet Nutrition in partnership with Clinician's Brief



There are several methods with which we can feed our pets, from free-feeding to meal-feeding, to a combination of the 2. Free-choice feeding allows your pet access to food at all times, whereas meal-feeding involves offering your pet set portions of food at given times. Although there are benefits to both methods, there are reasons why your veterinarian may be recommending transitioning your pet to set meal-feedings.

Are There Risks Associated with Free-Feeding Pets?

Although free-feeding may be a simpler approach to feeding, there are some inherent drawbacks to unlimited access to food. One such drawback is the risk for obesity,¹ which is already a large problem in our pet population.^{2,3} Obesity can be associated with diabetes mellitus, arthritis, liver disease, certain cancers,⁴ the inability to exercise, and pain, making it an important disease to avoid.

Free-feeding also makes it difficult to monitor your pet's food intake, which is an important indicator of their overall health. Many common veterinary diseases can present with decreased appetite,⁵ which may go unnoticed for days or even weeks if food intake is unknown. The timing of food ingestion also becomes important when other signs of disease such as regurgitation or vomiting occur. In addition, because free-feeding can result in reduced observation while a pet is eating, changes such as dysphagia (difficulty swallowing) or bradyphagia (abnormal slowness of eating), which may point to certain oral or dental disorders,⁶ can go undetected.

What Are the Benefits of Feeding Portioned Meals?

From a weight management perspective, offering specific servings of food at scheduled times is a practical way to monitor and maintain an appropriate calorie intake for your pet. This may be essential in helping your pet lose weight, maintain their weight, or, in some cases, put on weight. Feeding pre-portioned meals is also more sanitary than free-feeding, as it limits the amount of time food is exposed, potentially enticing insects, rodents, or other critters into your home.

I Have Multiple Pets. Can Meal-Feeding Work for Me?

Meal-feeding can be adapted to virtually any home situation, whether you have multiple pets or an atypical schedule. If one or more of your pets receives a veterinary therapeutic food, you may be concerned with ensuring that your other pets do not ingest the therapeutic food. Although you will need to verify with your veterinarian, some therapeutic foods are suitable for otherwise healthy pets in the household. However, if your pets must be separated for dietary, behavioral, or other concerns, there are simple solutions to help facilitate separate feedings. Consider purchasing an automatic feeder for each pet and program them to dispense meals simultaneously in different areas of your home. Once pets are acclimated to this routine, it will help facilitate the feeding of separate diets. Sometimes feeding pets separately

Free-feeding makes it difficult to monitor your pet's food intake, which is an important indicator of their overall health.

requires creativity. Consider using baby gates, small or elevated areas that only one pet can physically access, or new technologies that allow access to food bowls through use of personalized electronic collars or microchips.

How Can I Help My Pet Make the Switch to Meal-Feeding?

If you and your pets are accustomed to free-choice feeding, transitioning to portioned meals can be made feasible with a few simple steps:

- ▶ Establish the time and place(s) for meals to occur. You may want to offer food more frequently while your pet is transitioning to meal-feedings. For example, try offering 3 to 4 meal-feedings initially, even if you plan to feed your pet twice daily long-term.
- ▶ Limit the amount of time your pet has access to the food bowl before changing the amount of food in the bowl. For instance, offer the same quantity of food that you normally would, but remove it after a few hours, paying attention to how much your pet eats at each meal.
- ▶ Using separate bowls for each pet, offer a portion of food during the designated meal time—preferably, no more and no less than your pet was eating while free-feeding. If a reduction in food is recommended by your veterinarian, implement this change gradually.
- ▶ Gradually reduce the amount of time the food is available for your pet(s) from a few hours to a few minutes for each meal.

Pets who need to gain or lose weight can also benefit from a personalized calorie calculation to ensure their caloric requirements are met.

Other Considerations

- ▶ With multiple pets, it can be difficult to determine how much food each pet consumes when free-feeding. Consult your veterinarian if you need assistance establishing your pet’s caloric needs for each meal.
- ▶ If possible, choose a quiet location with limited distractions for feeding your pet. Initially, keep the location of the feedings the same until the pet has adjusted to meal-feedings.
- ▶ Pets who need to gain or lose weight can also benefit from a personalized calorie calculation (see **Suggested Reading**) to ensure their caloric requirements are met. Work with your veterinarian to determine your pet’s individual needs.

Suggested Reading

Basic Calorie Calculator for Dogs and Cats: vet.osu.edu/vmc/companion/our-services/nutrition-support-service/basic-calorie-calculator

References

1. Baldwin K, Bartges J, Buffington T, et al. AAHA nutritional assessment guidelines for dogs and cats. AAHA website. <https://www.aaha.org/globalassets/02-guidelines/nutritional-assessment/nutritionalassessmentguidelines.pdf>. Accessed July 29, 2022.
2. Lund EM, Armstrong PJ, Kirk CA, Klausner JS. Prevalence and risk factors for obesity in adult dogs from private US veterinary practices. *Intern J Appl Res Vet Med*. 2005;4(2):177-186.
3. Lund EM, Armstrong PJ, Kirk CA, Klausner JS. Prevalence and risk factors for obesity in adult cats from private US veterinary practices. *Intern J Appl Res Vet Med*. 2005;3(2):88-96.
4. Zoran DL. Obesity in dogs and cats: a metabolic and endocrine disorder. *Vet Clin North Am Small Anim Pract*. 2010;40(2):221-239.
5. Johnson LN, Freeman LM. Recognizing, describing, and managing reduced food intake in dogs and cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2017;251(11):1260-1261.
6. Harvey CE. Oral diseases and veterinary dentistry. *Tijdschr Diergeneeskd*. 1987;112(Suppl 1):20S-25S.

ADDITIONAL NOTES FROM MY VETERINARY TEAM
