



Diagnosing Food Allergies in Cats: Elimination Diet Trials

Elimination diet trials can be tough! We're here to help. The **Canadian Academy of Veterinary Dermatology** would like to share some information and tips about this very important diagnostic step.

Your veterinarian has reason to believe that a “cutaneous adverse food reaction” – which we will simply call a “**food allergy**” – might be playing a role in your cat’s skin or ear problems. By addressing this allergy, you can help your cat feel much better.

That’s the good news! The bad news is that there is no accurate skin or laboratory test for food allergies in pets. And a cat with a food allergy looks just like one with environmental allergies and might, in fact, have both. Currently, the **only** way to diagnose a food allergy is using an **elimination diet trial**.

The elimination diet trial (also called a “hypoallergenic” diet trial) is an 8-week test period when your cat can eat one thing, and one thing only: the food recommended by your veterinarian. **Any** other food, even a tiny treat, can affect the results of the trial. To give your cat the best chance of responding, you must be 100% strict with the trial for the full 8 weeks. We know that this is easier said than done!

What happens during those 8 weeks? If your cat has a food allergy, you will see a gradual 50% to 100% improvement in his condition, depending on whether other allergies are present. After 8 weeks, your veterinarian may ask you to return to your cat’s regular food and treats to see if his symptoms return. This step is called a **dietary challenge**, and is only done after your veterinarian has reassessed your cat. The challenge is recommended because many other factors (medications, season changes) can contribute to your cat’s improvement during those 8 weeks.

We’re often asked the following questions:

I haven’t changed the food recently and my cat’s poops are perfect; could he still have a food allergy?

Yes! In fact, most cats with food allergy have eaten their food 2 years or longer. And it’s very common for the allergy to affect only the skin or ears. Only as estimated 10-15% of cats with food allergies will also

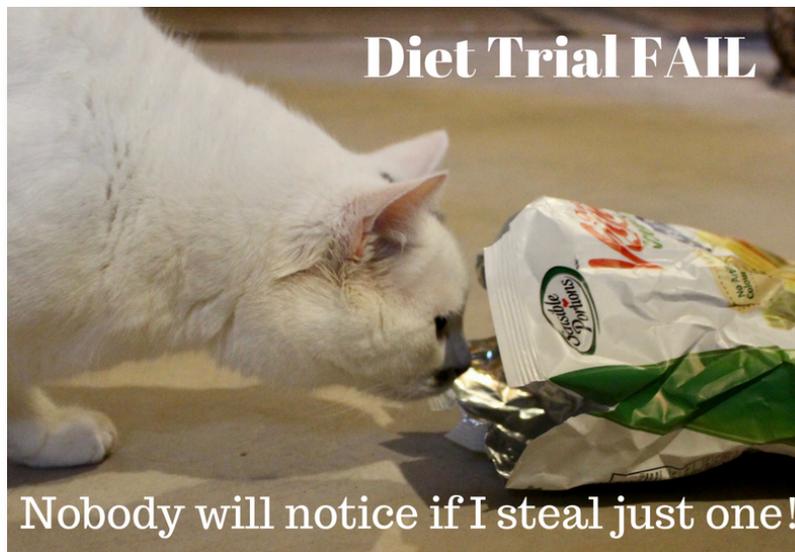
show gastrointestinal signs such as vomiting and diarrhea.

How common are food allergies?

Estimates vary, but we know food allergies are among the top three most common types of allergic skin diseases in cats. Food allergy accounts for 1-6% of all cat skin problems. Some breeds, such as the Siamese, are slightly more likely to develop a food allergy.

What could my cat be allergic to?

Almost anything! Food allergy is an inappropriate



reaction of the immune system against a normal – and perfectly safe – food ingredient called an “allergen”. The most common allergens are proteins in food, which are abundant in meats but also found in grains, fruit, and vegetables. Common allergens for cats include beef, dairy, chicken, egg, fish. But there are many others!

What is an Elimination Diet?

Simply put, it's any food that we think doesn't contain the ingredients that your cat may be allergic to. Elimination diets, also called “hypoallergenic” diets, fall into two categories: novel ingredient diets and hydrolyzed diets.

A **novel ingredient** diet is made from foods that your cat has never eaten. This makes the ingredients new, or “novel”, to his immune system. The immune system usually tolerates these ingredients because there hasn't been time for an allergy to develop. A

novel ingredient diet can be veterinary kibble or wet food, or a home-prepared food, based on your veterinarian's recommendation and your preference.

Although they can be very effective, there are a couple of drawbacks to novel ingredient diets. It can be difficult to find ingredients that are truly novel if a cat has already “eaten everything on the Ark”. And we suspect that in some cases, cats can have reactions to ingredients that cross-react with ingredients that they have never eaten. For example, some cats allergic to beef may show symptoms when fed lamb or venison, even if they have never eaten these meats.

A **hydrolyzed** diet is made with ingredients that are broken down (hydrolyzed) in a way to make them very small. These tiny fragments are so different from the full-sized protein that they are much less likely to trigger an allergy. So even if your cat has an allergy to soy, he might safely be able to eat a food made from hydrolyzed soy.

Hydrolyzed diets can be a good choice in cats that have eaten a wide variety of foods and treats.

In addition to being hypoallergenic for your cat, the food must also be one that he digests well and eats happily for 8 weeks. Each cat is different, so sometimes we have to try a few different foods before we get it right! With cats, it is very important that they continue eating their food and do not stop.

If your cat is placed on a special diet for food allergies but will not eat enough of this diet, you must contact your veterinarian **immediately** for advice on how to proceed. They may recommend switching back to your cat's previous diet for a short period to get him eating well again.



Pitfalls

These common items can be the reason for elimination diet trials to fail:

- foods used to hide pills (even if labeled hypoallergenic)
- flavoured toothpaste
- chewable or flavoured medicines
- fatty acids such as fish oils
- nutritional supplements
- gelatin capsules
- unwashed dishes, bowls, and cutlery
- “just a tiny piece” of food for a treat
- food dropped on the floor (we're looking at you, toddlers!)

Sometimes more than one diet trial might be recommended by your vet. If your cat improves on the first trial but is still showing signs of milder skin disease, your veterinarian may wish to pursue another trial with a different protein to see if there will be further improvement during the second trial.

What treats can I give during a diet trial?

None, unless they are specifically made to accompany the recommended food. Don't assume that treats with a hypoallergenic label will be suitable. Even the tiniest amount counts: the flavouring in a single monthly flea preventative pill is enough to set off an allergy. Think of a child with a peanut allergy. Would you give them "just one" peanut?

Want to show your cat some love during the diet trial? See the *Tips for Elimination Diet Trials* below.

Can I use a pet store food to diagnose a food allergy?

How about a grain-free, vegan, or raw diet?

We recommend using veterinary diets or home-prepared foods for the elimination diet trial. Studies show that some store-bought foods can contain small amounts of ingredients not listed on pet food labels, making them unsuitable for the 8-week elimination diet trial period. Grain-free diets are not effective for elimination diet trials unless your cat only has a known grain allergy. And because we rarely know what your cat is allergic to when we start the diet trial, we would miss many food allergies by simply switching to a grain-free diet. Cats are carnivores (meat eaters) so feeding them vegan diets poses significant health risks. Raw foods are not recommended for diet trials. They don't work any better than their cooked counterparts, and may harm your cat and your family.

Will I need to feed the recommended diet forever?

In most cases, no. Even if your cat has a food allergy, your veterinarian can often recommend foods other than the trial diet that will work for long-term feeding. And of course, if your cat does not improve by 8 weeks, there is no reason to continue the food.

Why is the diet trial so long?

It takes a long time for the skin to normalize after a food allergen is removed. A diet trial lasting 8 weeks will diagnose about 95% of food allergic cats. On the other hand, a trial lasting 4 weeks will diagnose only about half.

How can I find out exactly what my cat is allergic to?

If your cat reacts to his previous food or treats, you might wish to find out exactly which ingredients caused the problem. Your veterinarian can guide you through a sequential process (provocation) that involves adding individual suspected food allergens to the diet for up to two weeks at a time.

Tips for Elimination Diet Trials

Tough love. You will need to be strong when confronted with those big green eyes, or the constant pestering, when your cat is asking for a treat. Think of the possible health benefits for your cat. Or imagine a peanut-allergic child asking for a peanut butter cookie!

Take it slow. Don't switch to the new food overnight. It's a recipe for refusal and stomach upset. Take at least 10-14 days to make the transition, starting with a very small amount of the new food on day one. Some cats need much longer than that. Start the 8-week countdown on the first day you feed only the elimination diet.

Example Transition Schedule

Day	Current diet %	New diet %
1	90	10
2	90	10
3	75	25
4	75	25
5	60	40
6	60	40
7	50	50
8	50	50
9	40	60
10	40	60
11	25	75
12	25	75
13	10	90
14	10	90
15	0	100

Don't give up. Though we always recommend a food that we think is best for your cat, what your cat actually thinks matters most. Call your veterinary team if you encounter food refusal, diarrhea, or any other problems. Cats can develop serious liver issues if they don't consume enough food. Contact your veterinarian immediately if your cat refuses the food or only eats part of his meals. Veterinary diets are guaranteed, so the food can be returned and replaced with another if your cat doesn't like it.

"Good kitty!" Make the food into a treat by putting it into your cat's cookie jar and using it as a reward. Remember to clean the jar first to prevent contamination from previous treats stored there. If your cat gets food from the kitchen counter or table, have a stash of the food at these locations. You can even hide it in a food-dispensing toy to make it more fun for your cat. Ask your veterinary team for other tips on rewarding your cat.

No stealing! Feed your cat separately from other pets to make sure he doesn't sneak into their bowls. Talk to your veterinarian about other tips for diet trial success in a multi-cat household.

Don't mix and match. Stick to one type of food during the trial. For example, don't add a venison canned food with a hydrolyzed dry food. No one food is 100% hypoallergenic for every cat, so feeding more than one type increases the chance of "missing" a food allergy.

Oh no, pills? If you struggle to give oral medications to your pet, ask your veterinarian about alternatives such as injections or topically applied treatments, or even delaying the diet trial.

Let your pack know. Your cat might have an entourage: children, friends, and members of your family. They need to know about the diet trial!

Plan ahead. Purchase the food well in advance of when you will run out.

No hunting. Try to limit time outside during the diet trial so your cat won't hunt and "add" proteins to the diet himself.

Stay clean. Keep the food in its original packaging, or thoroughly wash the container you use for storing the food.

Keep track. Keeping a calendar of your pet's symptoms, medications, and food can really help us figure out what's working, and what's not.

Don't panic! If you make a mistake, it's OK. Record it on the calendar and keep going with the diet trial.

Stay strong. For the sake of your cat's health, do your best to stick with the trial for the whole 8 weeks. Call your veterinary team with questions, or to ask for help.

Every cat is different. We know it takes patience and effort to complete an elimination diet trial. But if your cat has a food allergy, your persistence can make a world of difference to his quality of life. Hang in there!

Elimination Diet Trial reminders

- Your veterinary team is the best resource for a food recommendation, and for answering any questions along the way.
- Do your best to ensure your cat's success: make sure he eats nothing but the recommended food for the whole trial.
- It's 8 weeks. You can do this!

Canadian Academy of Veterinary Dermatology

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