

Food Trials – what every owner needs to know

Many young adult dogs and cats are taken to their vet because of recurrent skin problems (itchy skin, ear infections, chewing feet) or because of ongoing, usually low grade vomiting and / or diarrhoea. Once it becomes clear that symptomatic treatment does not resolve the problem permanently, the vet will usually suggest further investigations. A diet trial is often one of first things that is suggested after parasites have been eliminated.

A food trial aims to exclude food as a trigger for the dermatological / intestinal irritation. Animals typically become allergic to a protein component of the food. This means that dogs and cats are much more likely to be allergic to the 'meat' component of the diet than to the starch component. The classic exceptions are Irish Setters that develop gluten hypersensitivity. Because of the Irish Setter example and probably because people commonly develop gluten sensitivities, gluten free starches (potatoes or rice) are usually used in diet trials.

The tricky part comes in selecting a protein source suitable for a diet trial for a particular individual. Here the theory says that animals are unlikely to be allergic to a protein that their immune system has never met before - so we have to identify a protein source that that particular pet has never eaten before. This involves carefully scrutinising the ingredient list of all the food the pet has eaten because eg beef flavoured tinned food usually not only contains beef but also chicken, fish meal and a host of other ingredients. Thus an animal that eats beef flavoured tinned food not only has to avoid beef but also chicken and fish meal during its diet trial. Owners also need to be honest about what people food their pet gets eg it's no use starting an ostrich and rice exclusion diet if your pet has been given bits of ostrich kebab when you braai. If a pet has eaten a very varied diet it may be very difficult to find a new, readily accessible, cheap protein source for that individual. In these cases, your vet may prescribe a hydrolysed protein diet. Here the proteins have been broken into such small pieces that they cannot be recognised by the immune system anymore.

Once the composition of the diet has been determined, you then need to decide whether you cook the diet yourself or buy it ready made in a bag. Beware of the cheap alternative here. Exclusion diets (consisting of only one protein and one carbohydrate source) are only available from your vet. Food you buy from the supermarket / pet food store may be cheaper, but also contains a whole bunch of other ingredients and is not suitable for a diet trial. Home cooking is arguably the best choice for dogs – but only if you can cook up the chosen diet consistently and without lapse for 6 weeks. Cats are more prone to nutritional deficiencies so are probably better on a kibbled / canned exclusion diet from your vet. Hydrolysed protein diets cannot be cooked at home.

Before you start the diet trial it is important to explain the purpose of the trial to everyone in the household. The purpose is to see whether your pet's symptoms can be controlled without long-term, often lifelong medication. Put into perspective like this, it may make it easier to resist those doleful eyes begging for the dregs of milk from your cereal bowl or just a TINY bit of that cheese / bacon / wors PLEASE. If you desperately need to feed treats, keep some of the exclusion diet aside from his/her meal and offer that as bribes when necessary. Remember, it takes 6 weeks on the exclusion diet and water ONLY for the immune system to calm down and the signs to improve – if they're going to. But small lapses can wreck weeks of work. Think of people you know with food allergies – they only need to eat tiny quantities of the offending food to become very ill. So there's no point at all of going to the expense and effort of doing a food trial if the whole family isn't going to stick to it. Good luck!