

# Jump start normal eating



‘Eat Up’ guide

In association with

**vn**times

**Virbac**

Shaping the future of animal health

# Introduction

Veterinary nurses frequently have to deal with cats and/or dogs that refuse to eat anything – be it after surgery, in recovery from a serious illness, or simply a poorly pet not feeling like feasting.

Owners experience the frustrations at home too, and despite the reputation pets have for eating just about anything, inappetence in both dogs and cats is a surprisingly common and frustrating problem. It can be challenging to treat, and, if not resolved, can quickly become life-threatening.

Knowing just how brilliant VNs can be in the fight to get pets eating, with all of their experience, knowledge and expertise, both Virbac – which prides itself on working closely with veterinary teams to ensure pets are fed an optimal diet – and *VN Times* have teamed up to ask them and other members of the profession to share their top tips when working with inappetent animals.

With tons of entries, it was clear to see VNs know their stuff when it comes to helping picky pooches and captious cats eat their much-needed nutrition. These tips and tricks form the basis of our Nutribound ‘Eat Up’ guide, which is packed with expert advice from veterinary nurses and other veterinary professionals who deal with inappetent patients on a weekly basis. We hope the practical tips and experiences they offer, combined with our own advice, will give you the inspiration you need to get even the most reluctant or fussy eaters tucking into their food again.

Rebecca Hubbard, VN Times editor



# 'Eat Up' guide



## Why nutrition is important

No matter what lifestage a cat or a dog is at, nutrition is a vitally important part of their health and wellbeing. For puppies and kittens, it is important they get the right balance of nutrients and calories to support their growth and development. For adult animals, it is important they maintain a lean body weight, particularly after neutering, as being over-weight can predispose to further health complications such as diabetes, osteoarthritis and lower urinary tract disease. In their senior years, both dogs' and cats' ability to digest food may change and disease states may require nutritional management.

It can be very frustrating when an animal stops eating, and trying to get them to eat again can be tough. A lack of interest in food and/or water is often nothing to worry about, however inappetence can sometimes have a more serious underlying cause.





## What is inappetence?

Inappetence in both dogs and cats is a surprisingly common and frustrating problem, for veterinary teams and for owners. It can be challenging to treat and can quickly become life-threatening if not resolved.

The consequences caused by periods of inappetence can affect the whole body. A lack of energy intake and nutrients means the body's reserve stores need to be used, known as a catabolic state, which can have detrimental effects if continuing for longer periods. It is also vital to ensure the inappetent patient remains hydrated. Food not only contains water but encourages drinking. Correct nutrition is key to ensure the health of the intestinal villi, as they have high energy, nutrient and protein requirements.

It is easy to see the importance of carefully monitoring inappetent patients, as changes in the body can start a cycle of diminishing returns. Early intervention and encouragement to eat is essential and will contribute to a dog or cats quick recovery from illness or surgery, decreasing hospitalisation time and limiting the development of secondary problems. If per-os feeding is not suitable enteral nutrition can be implemented through either a nasogastric or oesophagostomy tube.

Tube feeding is a very effective method for preventing animals from becoming undernourished during the recovery phase. Where you place the tube depends upon the condition the animal has. Management and feeding plans should be carefully drawn up so everyone knows how much food has been given and when, which allows close monitoring of the patient. It is vital the full nutritional needs of the inappetent patient are met. This can be achieved by using liquid food and complementary feeds (such as Nutribound™) in the tube and ensure the correct nutrients are given for the convalescent animal.



## Causes of inappetence: surgery

Surgery is one of the biggest causes of inappetence in cats and dogs and there can be many things that can lead to a lack of interest in eating and drinking. Simply entering the clinic can be a daunting and stressful experience, in an unfamiliar environment, often perceived as a scary environment by cats and dogs. Taking familiar items from home into the clinic with them can help to relieve some of this stress. Finding out which type of bowls an animal normally eats from at home i.e. are they wide, made from metal or plastic, can be helpful, particularly for cats. Once in the clinic, pheromone plug-ins on wards can also help reduce stress caused by the unfamiliar environment.

A second factor to consider is that some of the medications administered may induce nausea and this can be a cause of animals refusing food. Reassessing the medications and what can be done to counteract the side effects of anything being administered may help animals be more accepting of food.

After a surgical procedure, there can be many factors which can prevent an animal from wanting to eat again dependent upon what the surgery was. Ensuring adequate analgesia, gut protectants and so on is vital to make the animal as comfortable as possible, which means the animal is more likely to start eating again.



## Causes of inappetence: illness?

There can be many things that may make pets feel off colour, and often inappetence can be one of the first signs of illness. If the underlying cause cannot be found, addressing the clinical signs, such as pain, nausea or pyrexia, can go some way to helping an animal want to eat again.

Cats can be particularly sensitive to periods of anorexia and inappetence, with changes occurring in the body within hours, which can induce vomiting and can lead to further dehydration and electrolyte losses. Even relatively short periods of anorexia and inappetence (as little as three days) can lead to liver damage, a condition known as hepatic lipidosis.



## Causes of inappetence: senior animals

For older animals there can be many reasons for inappetence. Sometimes appetite can naturally wane with age, however, more commonly, there are other factors. Dental disease is particularly prevalent in elderly patients and painful teeth, plus associated gingival or periodontal disease, can cause a lack of interest in food and water. Other diseases, for example kidney or liver disease, can also cause animals to go off their food.

How pets access their food bowls will also change with age. As animals get older, dogs and cats inevitably develop osteoarthritis after years of natural wear and tear on their joints. This can mean cats can't jump as high and dogs may struggle to get to bowls on the floor. For dogs, raising their bowls can make eating easier, and for cats, make sure that bowls aren't in hard to reach places such as upstairs or on high surfaces.



# Helpful tips and techniques

We recently asked vet nurses and other members of the profession to share their top tips when working with inappetent animals. Here is what some of them had to say:

Always offer a small amount of warmed food so as not to overwhelm the patient. Use a shallow dish or even try sprinkling a little of the food on the bed in front of the patient as this can sometimes encourage them to eat. For animals that are used to or prefer dry food you could try soaking in warm water to alter the consistency without changing the flavour. This can help when they have particularly sore mouths. A small amount of low salt gravy can be made up and added to food. This could also be frozen into ice cubes which some dogs like to crunch, or added to water to encourage drinking. Cats (especially) if nervous may prefer to have their food offered if the cage can be covered, or inside a hide box if that can be provided. A drop of valarian on a cats bedding can help to reduce anxiety, a symptom of which is often inappetence. Spending time with your patient can help to encourage them to eat. You could groom them, sit with them, or with dogs take them outside with some food as the stress of being inside a kennel could be contributing to their inappetence. Ask owners to bring in their own familiar food or favourite treat. Utilise the owner/animal bond and see if they can encourage them to eat.

Jackie Morgans RVN

My top tip is always feed something that smells appealing. Fish is always good for cats and I find chicken good for dogs.

Corrie Dean RVN

If you're not getting anywhere after 24-48 hours, consider placing a feeding tube early on, not five days down the line! Often the act of feeding them stimulates their appetite, and they'll eat on their own in no time.

Katie Curtis MRCVS

For feline patients, using a ceramic saucer can make a big difference. Cats dislike their whiskers touching the side of bowls, and I find plastic bowls hold smells of disinfectant. Metal bowls show reflections too which can also put cats off.

Kelly Eyre RVN

# Helpful tips and techniques

Spending time with the patient, gaining their trust. Stroking, massaging, talking to them. Taking your time, it cannot be rushed. Making sure only one or two of us sit with the same patient so they become familiar with us.

Lucy Osborne MRCVS

Cats - put a little bit of something tasty on their toes, they'll naturally lick it off. Either that or warm up their favourite treat to make it smell really strong, like some yummy sardines.

Millie Barnsley RVN

## ▶ What can I use?

Nutribound® is a highly palatable, liquid, complementary feed which stimulates eating and drinking in cats and dogs.

The formulation comes in a handy-sized take-home bottle easy for owners to administer and can be given for up to 14 days or until a return to normal eating and drinking is observed.



### Liquid form

- No need to dilute
- Easy to use for tube or syringe feeding



### Highly palatable

- Good patient compliance
- Stimulates water and feed intake



### Selective formula

- Rich in essential nutrients, Omega 3 and 6, prebiotics and vitamins



For more information please contact your Virbac Territory Manager or Virbac Ltd,  
Woolpit Business Park, Windmill Avenue, Woolpit, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP30 9UP  
Tel: 01359 243243 Email: [enquiries@virbac.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@virbac.co.uk) [www.virbac.co.uk](http://www.virbac.co.uk)  
PLEASE USE MEDICINES RESPONSIBLY. [www.noah.co.uk/responsible](http://www.noah.co.uk/responsible)

**Virbac**

Shaping the future of animal health