

Why Cats Need to Eat

By Faith Maloney

Alphie was 14 years old when he lost his home and his main person and came to live at Best Friends. It was just all too much for him, so he stopped eating. Because Alphie was also diabetic, he really needed to have food in his system for his body to function so his not eating became a life-threatening emergency. Older cats are susceptible to a condition known as fatty liver disease, which is an accumulation of fats, also known as lipids, in the liver tissue.

Cats metabolize protein and fats in their own unique way. Many other animals, including humans, can fast for relatively long periods with no long-term ill effects, but after about three days of not eating, cats (and especially cats carrying some extra weight) start sending fat cells to the liver to process into lipoproteins for fuel. However, cats' livers are not terribly efficient at processing fat and much of the fat is stored in the liver cells. If this condition is left untreated, eventually the liver fails and the cat dies.



Alphie was diagnosed with fatty liver disease and treatment was started. The treatment is force-feeding, which sounds rather invasive but it is essential to break the cycle of anorexia and get the cat to start eating again on his own.

The veterinarian placed a feeding tube in Alphie's esophagus through his neck as a way of getting nutrition into his stomach to kick-start his eating again. The food most commonly used to do this is A/D, a prescription food made by Hills Science Diet. The food is mixed with water according to the vet's prescription. The staff at the Best Friends clinic set Alphie up with a syringe pump that pushed the food mixture through his feeding tube over a span of 30 minutes. Usually this kind of syringe tube feeding is done by hand and often cats cannot absorb the food well if delivered in a faster way. But the 30-minute feeding, which was repeated several times through the day, enabled Alphie to gradually get better. It still took over four weeks for him to start eating again on his own, but eventually he did.

Another cat who fell victim to fatty liver disease is Boomer; he lost his person to cancer and became homeless at the age of 10. Cats are attached to both their person and their home, so to lose both at the same time can send a cat into deep depression. Boomer's situation was a bit different from Alphie's in that he stopped eating more gradually. Best Friends staffer Bobbie Foster, Boomer's new person, began to notice that Boomer was eating less and less food, losing weight and becoming lethargic. Fatty liver disease was diagnosed and Bobbie began to feed him the prescribed food amounts using a syringe

directly into his mouth. It was a long process, as the meals needed to be given slowly and precisely to avoid Boomer aspirating or vomiting.

Bobbie says, "Each morning I would fill clean baby-food jars with the exact amount for each meal so that it was easy to get going. It took about four weeks of careful feeding every few hours to turn his appetite around."

Some things to look out for in your own cats: A previously overweight older cat suddenly becomes anorexic, meaning he quits eating and loses weight. He may salivate excessively or start to vomit. Or you might notice your cat becoming very lethargic and show evidence of jaundice — yellowing of the eyes and skin.

If you see any of these symptoms, it's time to ask your vet to run some tests to determine what might be wrong. These symptoms could relate to other diseases, but a blood profile or a liver biopsy will confirm the diagnosis of fatty liver disease. Then the force-feeding treatment should be started.

The lesson from these cats is that it's very important to be aware of your cat's appetite every day. Being able to act quickly if he should stop eating could very well save his life.

Faith Maloney, one of the founders of Best Friends, is a consultant in all aspects of animal care at the Sanctuary, including the Best Friends clinic and adoption programs.

See also: Feeding Your Feline