

Tips on Feeding your Lymphoma Kitty

By Theresa Brucker, Mom of angel Jean-Luc

General

One of the biggest challenges we have when we first get the lymphoma diagnosis is to keep our kitty eating well enough to stay strong and fight the disease. This article will present some of the ways that I have used and some that I have learned from others on these lists. Hopefully, these ideas will help with some of your feeding challenges. Many of us have found that our cat's tastes changed during chemo, and some of it may be because of a food aversion.



Jean Luc nibbling his food

Their former favorites now make them think of how they felt right before chemo started, when the lymphoma was really making them feel bad, especially if they have GI lymphoma or some kidney involvement. So you may need to find a new favorite. We have found that buying a wide assortment of types and flavors helps us find something that they will eat. Some of them may like the flavors of canned food with lots of gravy. Others might like the pouches of food. I tried so many brands and flavors, sometimes opening four or five cans before finding something he would eat. Luckily, I had another cat who was more than willing to take care of the leftovers. And I found that with all the different types and consistencies of Fancy Feast, my cat was more likely to eat some of that. I found that when he was very sick at the beginning, he would eat the sliced beef and giblets, which had a lot of gravy in it at that time. He would mostly lick up all the gravy and leave the meat, but I fed him lots and lots of cans of it, and that kept him going at the beginning. When he started to feel a little better, he would eat the minced beef and the minced turkey. It still had lots of gravy, which I think he considered soothing, and he got more little pieces of actual meat.

Another trick I discovered was that my cat, Jean-Luc, was more likely to eat willingly in the wee hours of the morning. For some reason, sick cats seem to be more likely to eat on their own at three or four in the morning. Those first few weeks, I was up all night anyway, so I would try at 2 a.m. and 3 and 4. He ate a lot more in those overnight hours than daylight hours. I would leave some canned food out where it was accessible to him all night. He often preferred to eat some of the older stuff rather than some of the fresh stuff, and I was going to let him have anything he wanted.

I found that when he was feeling nauseous, he didn't want to be presented with a big plate of food. I would put just a little bit on the plate at a time. That way, the smell and sight of the food wouldn't overwhelm him when he wasn't feeling good.

If you can't get your kitty to eat cat food, try all meat, no onion baby food. If they don't lick it off the plate, try spoon-feeding or offering it on your fingers, allowing them to lick it off. I have found that the Beech Nut stage one all-meat baby foods were some that worked well. I still have some on hand in case of a food strike. If you decide to try a baby food and it doesn't list onion, but it does have a general reference to spices or flavorings, it's a good idea to call the company and make sure there is no onion. **Onion can cause Heinz-body anemia in cats, even in very low amounts**, and we don't want to give our cats any more challenges than they are already dealing with. I also stayed away from the Gerber because it has cornstarch in it. I have a cat with IBD who cannot tolerate corn, wheat, or soy in any amount or she has problems with diarrhea, so I tried to stay away from those ingredients since she would eat whatever was left by Jean-Luc. If your cat has intestinal lymphoma or lymphoma in addition to IBD, you may also want to stay away from those ingredients. (Jean-Luc did have mild IBD, but he was able to tolerate the wheat gluten in the Fancy Feast beef flavors, and Toni, my severe IBD cat, could not.)

When all else fails, some people have had success with deli meat, boiled chicken, or even pureeing some cooked meat mixed with a little water and offering that.

It is not a good idea for a cat to be on baby food or other people-food long-term, but sometimes that is all they will eat. If they seem to be eating only baby food or boiled chicken or deli meats, you may want to check with your vet about supplements, particularly taurine. Food designed for people does not have enough taurine for a cat. Giving them a supplement could prevent serious problems. My understanding is that any taurine not needed will pass through the body without causing harm, so you wouldn't have to worry about overdosing them, but still check with your vet before starting any supplements.

Assist Feeding

There is a Yahoo group that deals specifically with feline assisted feeding and can give you a lot of great tips and advice on different methods of assist-feeding. Here is a link to the group: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Feline-Assisted-Feeding/>

I know that some people refer to this as "force-feeding", but what we are really doing is trying to gently assist them to get some food into them that they need. There are two main methods, spoon-feeding and syringe-feeding.

Jean-Luc did not allow me to syringe-feed, getting mad at me and spitting it all out when I tried, but I have since learned that I was doing it wrong, so it's probably a good thing that we went to the spoon-feeding method.

I started out by putting a little food on a plastic spoon and putting it in front of his face. He, of course, would turn away. I would persist in putting it in front of him, gently touching his nose with a bit of the food. He would lick it off his nose and sometimes it would pique his appetite and he would start to eat on his own. Other times, I had to persist and keep pestering him with the spoon. You just can't tell a cat with words that if he eats a little, it will help his tummy feel better. So you have to show them by getting them to lick a little here and there until they start getting bites and eating again. It's very important not to just wait until they feel like eating. I always used a plastic spoon rather than metal because I was afraid that if the metal were to bump a tooth, that could cause an unpleasant sensation, and I didn't want to give any additional reason for a food aversion. You can use the type of plastic spoons that you get from fast-food places, or you can use baby spoons that are coated with some sort of plastic.

When you get ready to syringe-feed, you may want to wrap the kitty in a towel or put a bib with a Velcro closure on the kitty to keep their chest area from getting food on it. They hate getting messy food on their fur, but they also hate having you clean it up. You also want to protect yourself with a towel or apron, since you may end up getting more on yourself than on the cat. Put the syringe in the side of the mouth, not the front. You want to put it gently in the side and very slowly put a little bit of food in the mouth. Allow the kitty to process and swallow before putting more in the kitty's mouth. You do not want to try to put the food down their throat. Doing it that way can lead to lung aspiration, which causes other serious issues. You have to be very patient and go very slowly. You want to get at least the equivalent of one 5.5 ounce can a day, depending on your cats weight, if your cat has lost weight you may need more, if not or your cat is fairly small you may need less.

The most accurate way to make sure they are getting enough to eat is to buy a scale and weight your cat, if your cat has lost weight you want to try and get them back to their normal weight, so feed enough so that your cat is gaining weight, usually a 5.5 can to a can and a half. Once they have reached their normal weight, feed enough to maintain it. It will be a slow process, but you will be helping the cat get stronger so that they can fight this disease.

Whether you are syringe-feeding or spoon-feeding, make it a time of bonding. I would plead and cajole and ask him to take one more bite for Mommy, and tell him how much I loved him and how important it is that he eat. I wanted to make sure that he knew by my words and tone of voice just how much I loved him, and as he ate more and felt better, he started to figure out that I really was trying to help.

****Inserted by Belinda Sauro -** If all else fails and your cat hasn't been eating regularly for a few days talk with your vet, you may need to explore the option of a feeding tube. This is not as scary as it sounds and has pulled many cats through that may not have otherwise made it. **Cats can develop hepatic lipodosis, a very dangerous liver condition if they go without food for as little as a couple of days, check your cats eye whites, gums and inside their ears, if you see any hint of a yellow tint, take them to your vet immediately and explain your cat isn't eating and**

your worried about hepatic lipodosis. There is a test your vet can do to test for this. A feeding tube is a good option for a cat that simply refuses to eat or will not cooperate with syringe feeding. I personally have had two cats with feeding tubes and both would not have made it without them. Here are a few links on the severity of HL [hepatic lipodosis] and a couple of links to explain how the different feeding tubes work and also some photos to show how they are inserted:

From HealthyPet.com

http://www.healthypet.com/library_view.aspx?ID=42&sid=2

Several Assisted Feeding Links

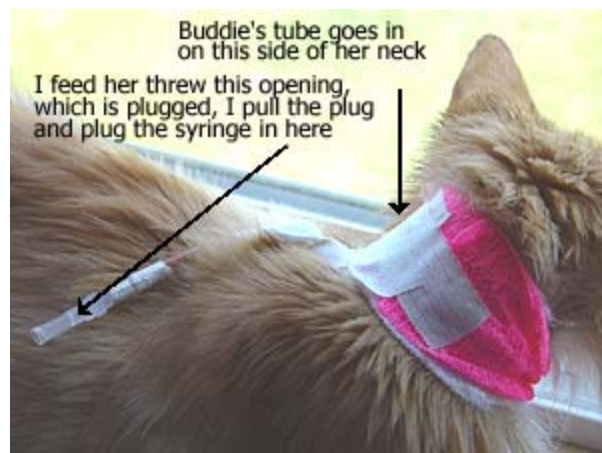
<http://www.zzcat.com/resources/nutrition.htm#feeding>

Long Beach Animal Hospital Feeding Tubes

<http://www.lbah.com/feline/ftube.htm>

Enteral Tube Feeding in the Critically Ill Patient

<http://www.vetmed.lsu.edu/intensivecare/enternal.htm>



These are photos of my Buddie with her feeding tube. **Belinda's Insert Finished ****

Whether you are able to coax your cat into eating or you have to assist in some way, it is vitally important that we keep our lymphoma kitties getting enough food. Believe it or not, even going without food for just one day, they could develop hepatic lipodosis, a very dangerous liver condition. I know that some cats can go without food for a day or two, but these cats are not healthy cats, so they are at a greater risk. You just never know which category your cat is going to fall into, and we don't need any extra complications. So please, keep your cat eating in whatever way works best for you.