

How to Transition Your Cat to Canned Food

Keep in mind that different tricks work on different cats

- If your cat has been eating dry food on a free-choice basis, take up the food and establish a schedule of two - three times per day feedings. I really do prefer just twice-daily feedings when trying to transition them. A normal, healthy hunger response after 12 hours goes a long way to convince them to try something new.
- Once the cat has transitioned to canned food, I prefer to either free-feed them (if they are not too fat) or to put out a meal three times per day. Small cats in the wild eat 8-10 small meals per day. I do not worry about leaving canned food out for up to 12 hours at a time. Keep in mind that a lion is not going to eat his entire prey immediately.
- If you want to take the transition very slowly, you can feed the amount that your cat normally consumes in a 24-hour period - split up into two feedings to get him used to meal feeding. Many people, however, are unsure as to how much their free-fed cat really eats so I would start off by figuring out the calories that your cat needs to maintain his weight - if he does not need to lose any weight – and then divide that in half for the AM and PM feedings.
- Again, most cats only need 150-250 calories/day. This means that, roughly, the AM and PM feedings should be about 100 calories each. The dry food bag should tell you how many calories are in a cup of food but if it does not, you can check to see if it is listed on the dry food chart at binkyspage.tripod.com/dryfood.html
- Leave the dry food down for 20 - 30 minutes, and then remove any uneaten portion. Repeat in 8 -12 hours depending on if you are feeding 2 or 3 times per day. During the first few days of transitioning to a set schedule, you can offer canned food during the dry food meals, or in-between meals. The stubborn ones, however, will not touch it. Do not despair - all cats will eventually eat canned food if their caregiver is determined, methodical, and patient enough.
- Once your cat is on a schedule you will notice that he is more enthusiastic about food during his proper mealtimes and will be much more inclined to try something new.
- Once you have established scheduled mealtimes, you will most likely need to start feeding a bit less at each mealtime in order to get the normal sensation of hunger to work in your favor. Again, we are trying to use the normal sensation of hunger to help us out. We are not trying to starve the cat into the diet change.
- Once your cat is on a schedule of meal-feeding instead of free-feeding, try feeding a meal of canned food only. If he will not eat it - and the very stubborn ones won't - try

not to get frustrated - and do not put down dry food. Try some of the other tips listed below. If he still will not eat the canned food, let him get a bit hungrier. Offer the canned again in a couple of hours – or just leave it out. Some cats will be more apt to try something new if they keep walking by it and seeing/smelling it. Try a different brand/flavor or a different 'trick'. Once it has been ~18 hours since he has eaten anything, give him just a small amount (~1/4 of a cup - or less if it is EVO) of his dry food – keeping track of his daily calorie intake.

- Remember to be patient. You do not have to accomplish this in a day...or a week...or even in a month.
- Exercising your cat with a tassel toy before feeding can also help stimulate his appetite.
- Instead of putting the dry food portion in his bowl, turn it into a game. Throw the dry food, one or two pieces at a time across the room so that he has to run back and forth and 'hunt' for it. This trick worked very well for my obesity project, Bennie. Bennie went from 30 lbs to 18 lbs once on portion-controlled canned food. I used 25 pieces/day of EVO for him to run after which was about 25 calories. EVO is very calorie-dense so 25 pieces of most dry foods will not contain these many calories.
- Playing the 'toss the dry food portion' game will help your cat burn off calories and should stimulate his appetite so that he may be more inclined to try canned food. It is also a great way to interact with your cat which helps to relieve the stress/boredom that many indoor cats experience.
- Cats' noses are much more sensitive than ours are. They can smell the dry food in the cupboards. I suggest putting it in the refrigerator (preferable to keep the fats from getting rancid) or at least putting it in a tightly sealed container. If they can smell it, they will hold out for it. Some people recommend getting it out of your house completely, but this is not possible when you are dealing with a very stubborn cat that needs a bit of time and patience to make the transition happen.
- Pet your cat while he is in front of the food bowl. Some cats will be stimulated to eat when being petted.
- The following worked for my cats: Sprinkle a very small amount of tuna– or any other favorite treat (some cats do not like fish and would prefer cooked chicken) - on the top of the canned food and then once they are eating this, start pressing it into the top of the new food. (The "light" tuna is better than the fancy white tuna because it has a stronger smell. Or, Trader Joe's makes a Cat Tuna that is very stinky.) Be careful to decrease the amount of fish as soon as possible. Health problems can occur with a predominantly fish-based diet. Plus, you do not want to create a situation where your cat will only eat very fishy foods.

- Make sure that any refrigerated canned food is warmed up a bit. Cats prefer their food at 'mouse body' temperature.
- Try offering some cooked (or raw – whole meats, rinsed well or parboiled) chicken or meat baby food or deli-meat ('cold-cuts'). One of the goals is to get your cat used to eating food that does not crunch. He needs to get used to a different texture. Also, chicken is a great source of protein to point him in the proper direction toward a high protein, low carbohydrate diet. If he eats the chicken, he may head right into eating canned food. Then again.... he may not.
- Try sprinkling some parmesan cheese on the canned food. Most cats love parmesan cheese and this trick has been very successful for me.
- Try a product called FortiFlora. This product can be obtained from your veterinarian or online. Most cats love FortiFlora and this has recently become my favorite trick. This is a probiotic made by Purina but you are not going to use it for its probiotic properties. You are just going to use it as a flavor enhancer. The base ingredient in FortiFlora is animal digest - the very substance that makes dry food so very enticing to cats. The directions say to use 1 package/day - and you can use this much if you want to - but this amount is not usually necessary. You may only need ~1/4 of a package - or less - with part mixed into the food and part sprinkled on top of the food just as you would use salt and pepper on your own food. I also have no worries about using this product past the expiration date.
- There are numerous freeze-dried meat treats on the market that you can also sprinkle on top of the canned food. Halo's Liv A Little is a popular choice.
- Speaking of texture, a common question is "can I just soak the dry food in water?" I hedge more than just a bit at this question. Dry food often has a high bacterial content. Mold is also often found in dry food. There have been many deaths of dogs and cats secondary to eating mold mycotoxins, vomitoxins and aflatoxins which often contaminate the grains found in dry food. If you want to try the trick of wetting down the dry food to alter the texture, please leave it out for only 20-30 minutes then discard it. Bacteria and mold thrive in moisture.
- Try dipping some dry food pieces in the juice from the canned food. Some cats may refuse to eat it if the dry food even touches the canned food. But if he will eat it with a bit of canned juice on it, try the 'chip and dip' trick. Scoop up a tiny bit of canned food onto the piece of dry food. Put them on a separate plate from his small portion of dry food. Some cats will eat their small portion of dry and then go investigate the dry food with a tiny bit of canned on it.
- Going one step further, try adding a few small pieces (the size of an eraser head) of the canned food to the portion of dry food. Your cat may pick around the canned food but will get used to the smell - and texture - even if he does not eat any pieces of the new food.

- Crush some dry food and sprinkle it on the top of the canned food.
- If you do not think it will upset your cat, try gently rubbing a bit of canned food or juice on the cat's gums. This may get him interested in the taste and texture of the new food - but do it gently. You do not want to make this a stressful situation and create a food aversion. (This trick is commonly used to get just-weaned kittens used to eating canned food.)
- If you do not think it will upset your cat, use your finger to put a tiny bit of canned food or juice on his paw for him to lick off. This has not worked for me in the two cats I have tried it on but it is another idea. Make sure you do it without stressing your cat. Again, you do not want to create a food aversion.
- If you have a multiple cat household, some cats like to eat alone in a less stressful environment, so you may need to take these cats into a separate, quiet room to think about the error of their ways - their carbohydrate/dry food addiction. Once in a quiet setting, away from the other cats, two of my cats would eat canned food/tuna 'meatballs' by hand. Not from a bowl, mind you, but only from my hand. I'm not sure who was being trained. They did eventually start eating from a bowl after a few hand feedings.
- Try various brands and flavors of canned foods. Try Friskies, 9-Lives, Fancy Feast, etc. Many cats love the foods that are all by-products and turn up their noses at the 'higher end' foods like Merrick, Wellness, Nature's Variety, etc. You can worry about feeding a higher quality canned food later and you can always mix different types of food together. The initial goal is just to get your cat used to eating canned food and not dry kibble. And keep in mind that it is better to feed Friskies or 9-Lives canned food than any dry food because, even though they are made up of by-products, they have the Big Three covered: 1) high in water, 2) usually low in carbohydrates, 3) animal-based proteins – not plant-based.