Interstitial Cystitis Diet Management

Diet and Feeding Management

Diet may play multiple roles in the therapy of IC. Most cats with IC already produce urine that is acidic (< 6.5 pH), and that contains few crystals. In the presence of macroscopic crystalluria, changing the diet to dilute the urine without increasing the pH is indicated. Although crystalluria is usually benign, severe crystalluria may aggravate an already-inflamed bladder. In our most recent study, we found that nearly 60% of cats ate 100% dry cat food; an additional 17% ate 75% or more dry food as their total daily intake. Compared to all cats, this is a disproportionate amount of total food intake as dry food. This does not mean that dry food consumption causes IC, but dry food consumption might unmask or aggravate the disorder in susceptible cats (making IC a nutrient-sensitive rather than a diet-induced disease).

Consequently, we recommend either adding water to the dry food or changing to canned foods, particularly if the patient is a male cat because of the risk of urethral obstruction, if this is feasible for the owner and the cat. Benefits of increased water intake could include dilution of any noxious substances in urine, more frequent urination to decrease bladder contact time with urine, and removal of any excess crystals. We also recommend that the same diet be fed for extended periods of time to reduce the stress that some cats seem to experience when the diet is changed.

I've found that changing cats from dry to canned foods can be a problem for some owners. I prefer to be sure that the cat is feeling better and eating its usual diet normally before starting to change diets, and have compiled the following list of candidate strategies to help with the change process.

Strategy 1

Take the old food away and provide only the new food. If the cat loses 10% of its body weight, return the old food until body weight returns, then repeat the process.
Strategy 2

A simple way to start changing your cat's diet is to offer the new food in the cat's usual feeding container next to the usual diet, using another container for the old diet. If you can put both foods in similar containers it will make the change somewhat easier. If the cat doesn't consume the new diet after an hour, take it up until the next feeding. At the next feeding, repeat the process, always providing fresh new food. Once the new diet is familiar to the cat (usually in a day or two), it should start eating it readily. When this occurs, continue to decrease the old diet by a small amount each day (1 teaspoon to 1 tablespoon per day; there are about 10 tablespoons of dry food in an 8 oz. measuring cup) until the change is complete. Using this strategy, the change should be completed over a period of 1 to 2 weeks.

Small quantities of your cat's favorite flavor, meat drippings, tuna, clam or salmon juice, can be mixed with the new food initially to make it more appealing. If you want to try other flavors, please check with your veterinarian first.

Feed your cat in a quiet environment where the pet won't be distracted.

You will be given advice on the minimum amount of food your pet should eat each day. If your pet doesn't eat all its food every day, this may be normal. As long as no more than 10% of weight is lost, you should not be too concerned during the period of transition.

Strategy 3

If the cat has food available all the time, and refuses the new diet, it may be easier to start by changing its feeding schedule to meal feeding by only leaving food out for 1 hour twice daily.

When the new feeding schedule is established, you are ready to introduce the new diet. Start by reducing the amount of regular food by 25% and replace with a small amount of the new food. Offer the new food in the cat's usual feeding container, and use another container for the old diet. If you can put both foods in similar containers it will make the change somewhat easier. After an hour, take up both containers until the next feeding. At the next feeding, repeat the process, always providing fresh new food. Once the new diet is familiar to the cat (usually in a day or two), it should start eating it readily. When this occurs, continue to decrease the old diet by a small amount each day (1 teaspoon to 1 tablespoon per day) until the change is complete. Using this strategy, the change should be completed over a period of 1 to 2 weeks.

Strategy 4

"Progressive counter-conditioning (adding dilute pepper sauce to the addicting ingredient) while concurrently offering a complete and balanced pet food of the same general flavor as the addicting substance can be successful" (this was on p125 of the new Hill's book; SACN 4th ed.)

Strategy 5

Switch to a semi-moist diet first (using one of the above methods), then to the canned diet.
My preference is strategy 2, but not because I've thoroughly tested it (or any of the others).

Do you have other ideas that you've tried that either did or didn't work? Do you have any recommendations for multiple cat households in addition to isolation, using a "creep" and/or changing the timing of feedings?

Another "strategy" is to add water to the dry food. I haven't found many cats that like this though (although most dogs don't seem to mind). I've also heard some concern that the bacteria content of dry foods was such that it was dangerous to add water, but I've never seen a case of bacterial enteritis result from a cat (or dog) consuming moistened dry food. Given that carnivores eat the viscera of their kills first, and having seen some of the things they eat when the opportunity permits, I'm somewhat surprised by the concern.

**Tips to Help You Help Your Pet Change Its Diet**

Changing a pet to a new food may not seem easy or convenient at first, but it can often improve your pet's health and quality of life. To help you and your pet through this process, we offer the following suggestions collected from clients and pets that have successfully made the change. If you find another way that works for you, tell us and we'll add it to the list!

**Advice for the pet:**

Before starting to change diets, be sure that your pet is at home, feeling better and eating it's usual diet normally. If your pet has food available all the time, and refuses the new diet, it may be easier to start by changing its feeding schedule to meal feeding by only leaving food out for 1 hour at each feeding time.

A simple way to start is to offer the new food in your pet's usual feeding bowl next to the old diet, using another bowl for it's old food. If you can put both foods in similar bowls it will make the change somewhat easier. If your pet eats the new diet readily, and the old food can be removed. If your pet doesn't eat the new diet after an hour, take it up until the next feeding. At the next feeding, repeat the process, always providing fresh new food. Once the new diet becomes familiar to your pet (usually in a day or two), it should start eating it readily. When this occurs, start to decrease the amount of the old diet offered by a small amount (about 25%) each day until the change is complete. Using this strategy, the change should be completed over a period of 1 to 2 weeks.

If necessary, small quantities (less than a tablespoon per cup of can of food) of your pet's favorite food, or meat or fish juices can be mixed with the new food initially to make it more appealing. If you want to try other flavors, please check with your veterinarian first.

Feed your pet in a quiet environment where it won't be distracted.

We will provide you with advice on the minimum amount of food your pet should eat each day. If your pet doesn't eat all its food every day, this may be normal. As long as no more than 10% of weight is lost, you should not be too concerned during the period of transition.

There are a variety of foods that may help your pet. Don't hesitate to ask us to try a different food if your pet doesn't like the first one you try.

**For the client:**
Start the change process during a time when you have fewer "outside distractions", if possible, so you can monitor the change process.

Plan where to buy the new food (we can help), where you will store it in your house, how you will discard used cans, etc. before you start. A few minutes of thoughtful planning may save hours of frustration trying to "get into" the new routine later.

If feeding is a time when you enjoy interacting with your pet, we can suggest some alternative activities that you can substitute, such as play, teaching tricks, walking, etc. for feeding. These other activities also can be used to distract the pet if it seems to beg for food. Pet often beg when what they really want is your attention, and would be just as satisfied with other forms of interaction with you!

Explain the importance of the diet change to other members of your household; we can help you with this!