



Tube Feeding in Cats

My veterinarian is suggesting that my cat be fed by a feeding tube. What exactly does this mean?

Tube feeding is an alternative way of providing nutrition to a cat that is suffering from anorexia or has an anatomical or surgical condition that prevents it from eating normally. Tube feeding generally refers to one of several techniques: naso-gastric tube, pharyngostomy tube, esophagostomy tube, jejunostomy tube and gastrostomy tube feeding.



Why is tube feeding necessary?

Proper nutrition is a critical factor in accomplishing a successful recovery from any disease. Since the physiology of cats is different than dogs and people, the consequences of not eating properly are much more significant in cats. In fact, cats that do not eat for as little as forty-eight hours can develop a potentially life-threatening form of liver malfunction known as *hepatic lipidosis*. Additionally, cats that are not eating are much more likely to have an impaired ability to fight infection and heal properly. These factors

combine to make maintaining adequate nutrition paramount in cats that are ill or undergoing surgery.

What can I do to encourage my cat to eat?

Many cats will experience reduced appetite or anorexia from the mildest illness. Sometimes simply changing the type of food or the time or location of feeding will trigger anorexia. If your cat is eating less than normal, here are some simple steps to try and encourage a normal appetite:

Slightly warm the food prior to feeding. It is important that the food is heated only slightly, to a much lower temperature than the 'hot' food that we eat.

Offer frequent, small meals of odorous, highly palatable food. Most cats will prefer foods that are high in protein and fat. Your veterinarian will recommend a personalized feeding plan for your cat, depending upon its needs.

Gently hand feed or place the food on the cat's tongue.

Ensure that the feeding area feels is quiet, warm and comfortable.

If a cat has refused food for more than three days, you should consult your veterinarian immediately. In some cats, appetite stimulating drugs such as diazepam or cyproheptadine may be effective. In cats that are refusing to eat, force-feeding is counterproductive. Not only is it unpleasant for the cat, there is a greatly increased risk of the cat inhaling food and developing aspiration pneumonia. Force-feeding will often increase aversion to food and may actually prolong the time before the cat will resume eating voluntarily.

What will happen if I am unable to get my cat to eat?

After three days of anorexia, the cat's body begins to enter a dangerous period. If nutrition is not quickly provided, the body will resort to mobilizing and metabolizing stored energy from the liver and other vital tissues. In this situation, serious and potentially irreversible damage may occur. If the cat fails to respond to conservative treatments, a feeding tube may be required. The most common types of feeding tubes used are the naso-gastric tube (sometimes interchangeably referred to as a naso-esophageal tube), the esophagostomy tube and the gastrostomy tube.

What is a Naso-gastric or Naso-esophageal Tube?

This type of tube is simple to insert and is the most common form of tube feeding in cats.



Naso-gastric tubes can usually be placed with minimal sedation. The sensitive lining to the nose is usually anaesthetized with local anesthetic drops and a narrow, flexible tube is inserted into the nostril and fed over the back of the soft palate down into the esophagus until it reaches about the level of the 9th rib. The tube is then attached to your cat's head by stitches or surgical glue.

It is generally necessary to fit a protective collar to prevent the cat from interfering with the tube. Because of the small diameter of the feeding tube, only extremely liquefied food, water and some medications can be given, and the tube is prone to becoming clogged. Naso-gastric tubes are not used if long term feeding is required, if the cat is vomiting, if there is severe facial trauma, if the esophagus is not functioning normally, or if the cat is unconscious. Naso-esophageal tubes can generally be kept in place for approximately five days.

What is an Esophagostomy Tube?

This type of tube is slightly larger than a naso-gastric tube, and enters the esophagus through a small incision in the neck. Cats must be sedated or anesthetized to place this type of feeding tube. The larger diameter of this feeding tube allows thicker food to be fed and there are fewer clogs or other potential complications. Feeding by esophagostomy tube takes considerably less time compared to naso-esophageal tube

feeding. Most cats have a wrap placed around their neck where the tube is inserted and the tube is capped when not in use. Esophagostomy tubes can generally be kept in place for up to two weeks.

What is a Gastrostomy Tube?

A gastrostomy tube is a large diameter tube that is surgically placed directly into the stomach through the skin and body wall. The end of the tube exits the skin just above the stomach on the side or flank of the cat. Short term general anesthesia is required to place a gastrostomy tube. An abdominal wrap or protective stocking is often worn by the cat while the tube remains in place. A gastrostomy tube is used when long term assisted feeding is required. Gastrostomy tubes allow for quick feedings and may be left in place for several weeks to months.

Is it hard to feed a cat through a feeding tube?

Feeding a cat through a feeding tube is easier and less complicated than you might think. Most people quickly get the hang of preparing food and connecting the syringe to the feeding tube. Caring for the tube placement site is also easy and requires little effort. Before each feeding, it is important to check whether the last meal has moved out of the stomach. This is accomplished by attaching an empty syringe and gently drawing back the plunger (aspirating). If there is food left, you will see evidence of this in the syringe. Your veterinarian will advise you about what to do in this situation based on your cat's specific condition and needs.

What type of food do you feed through a feeding tube?

Your veterinarian will prescribe a personalized feeding plan for your cat. Most commonly, you will use commercially available canned or powdered food or cat food that has been liquified in a blender. The amount that needs to be fed and the number of meals will depend on the size of your cat, whether they need to gain (or lose) weight and the disease or problems being treated.

What are the complications of tube feeding?

Generally, there are few complications with tube feeding once the cat is stable. The most common complications include infection at the site of tube insertion into the skin, inadvertent removal of the tube by the cat or owner, and clogging of the tube. The risk of food leaking out of or around a gastrostomy tube into the abdomen is very rare once a *stoma* or adhesion between the body wall and stomach has formed. This usually forms within one to two weeks. In general, complications and difficulties with feeding tubes are relatively uncommon. Your veterinarian will instruct you on how to specifically resolve any complications or problems that arise.

Are there situations where tube feeding is not possible?

In rare circumstances, such as cats with uncontrollable vomiting or unconsciousness, tube feeding is not possible. In these cases it may be necessary to consider intravenous feeding. Unfortunately, intravenous feeding of dogs and cats is complicated, difficult and expensive. It is only recommended when no other feeding methods are available.