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## MEDICATION

# New Arthritis Drug Approved Exclusively for Cats

*Monoclonal antibody significantly reduces joint pain.*

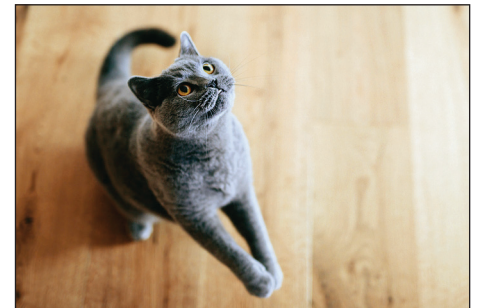
**Y**ou have probably heard of monoclonal antibodies as drugs that help fight COVID-19. Now, a monoclonal antibody developed strictly for relieving arthritis pain in cats has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Called Solensia (generic name frunevetmab injection), it is actually the first monoclonal antibody approved for use in any species other than humans.

All monoclonal antibodies act by blocking the action of something in the body that causes a problem. Solensia acts by binding to a pain-regulating protein, preventing pain signals from reaching the brain and allowing cats to jump, twist to self-groom, and use the litterbox more easily. With more than 90 percent of cats over age 12 estimated to develop arthritis and almost one in two cats experiencing arthritis pain, every bit of pain relief helps.

### Administered by vets only

Solensia is not a pill. It's an injection that a veterinarian has to administer once a month. Some cats experience side effects: vomiting, diarrhea, injection site pain, scabbing on the head and neck, dermatitis, and itchy skin. But the FDA says these effects were relatively mild in studies and did not require cessation of treatment.

The drug should be available sometime in the second half of this year. In the



© PHOTO: Michael Beutner / iStock

**A cat treated successfully for arthritis may regain some spring in his step.**

meantime, don't forget the four other mainstays of arthritis treatment in cats. The synergistic effect is greater than just the effect of a single drug.

- 1. Help an overweight cat take off excess weight.** Extra pounds are only second to advancing age as a cause of feline arthritis pain. Helping your cat lose just a couple of extra pounds will take pressure off compromised joints.
- 2. Moderate exercise.** Gentle physical activity — chasing a feather, working with a food puzzle — can build up muscles that then act as shock absorbers for the joints.
- 3. Medical therapy.** Pain relievers that don't target arthritis specifically may still be of use. These include anti-inflammatory drugs as well as gabapentin.
- 4. Supplements.** Supplements with glucosamine and chondroitin — cartilage-protecting agents — may help slow joint deterioration. Their quality varies, so choose one with your veterinarian's help. 🐾

## Yes, The Scratching Post Looks Ugly. That's How Cats Like It.

“Scratching post” and “interior decorating” do not go together, which is no doubt why many people keep their scratching posts in out-of-the-way places — behind the couch or in a back hallway. But doing that only invites scratches and tears in the fabric of your upholstered and wicker furniture. That's because aside from leaving an olfactory mark when scratching, cats also like to leave a visual mark. Hide the visual evidence, and the allure of the scratching post fades next to the allure of a piece of furniture that's out in the open.

Sometimes it works to start by putting the scratching post in a spot that's easy to see and access, then very gradually moving it an inch or two every couple of days to a place that's more to your liking. But sometimes that *doesn't* work.

Bottom line: If you love your cat, a torn-up scratching post is most likely going to be in your everyday line of vision.



As this cat can attest, the aim of having a scratching post is not for it to look good.

© Nikioti Chekalin | Bigstock

## Have You Picked Up Your Kitten Today?

If it so happens that you will be bringing home a kitten from a new litter, choose one that is picked up and handled by people for at least 15 minutes a day. Forty-five minutes is optimal for getting kittens younger than 7 weeks old used to having people in their lives, but 15 minutes will still go a long way to reduce a very young cat's fear and anxiety — not just of people but also of dogs and other animals. The more a cat is handled when very young, the more confident she will feel in general.

## When Hairballs Become Dangerous

Most of the time, hairballs are harmless. Nobody likes to see their cat retching uncomfortably, but it's just part of feline life. And expelling a hairball is over pretty fast. In rare cases, however, a hairball can become a life-threatening emergency by causing an intestinal blockage. How can you tell the difference between harmless hairballs and harmful ones? Look for these signs:

- Vomiting, gagging, retching, or hacking that keeps going without actually producing a hairball
- Lack of appetite
- Lethargy
- Constipation
- Diarrhea

If any of these signs don't go away on their own within a day or so, bring your pet to the veterinarian. They can be symptoms of many conditions other than hairballs that won't dislodge, but whatever the problem, it needs tending before too much time is lost and the cat is in real danger. 🐾

The newsletter for caring cat owners

catnip

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**Subscriptions:** \$39 per year (US)

**Digital only:** \$20 per year (US)

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**Postmaster:** Send address changes to *Catnip*, PO Box 8517, Big Sandy, TX 75755-8517.

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# What's Your Plan for Your Cat in a Weather-Related Emergency?

*A preparedness plan is essential for your pet's wellbeing in a storm or fire.*

Almost one in four Americans has now had to evacuate their home due to a disaster or other emergency, according to data just released by the ASPCA. Almost half of those people left at least one pet at home. Forty percent were gone for at least 4 days, with almost 10 percent gone for at least 8 days. Many left food and water behind, but that doesn't do much in the face of rising waters, destructive winds that can tear the roof off a building, or encroaching wildfires.

You could be next. The United States is becoming a hot spot for more, not fewer, climate-related disasters: hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, fires, floods. It's for that reason that it's important to include your pet in a preparedness plan. Disasters are by definition emergencies, making it very hard to think things through in real time.

Fortunately, it's easier to protect your cat in the event of a disaster than it used to be. There's now a law in place that says in order for states, cities, and counties to receive federal funding for their disaster relief plans, those plans must "account for the needs of individuals with household pets and service animals before, during, and following a major disaster or emergency." Called the PETS Act, it means, generally speaking, that for municipalities to receive federal funding for their disaster relief plans, emergency shelters have to be set up that are pet friendly, along with other steps put in place to protect companion animals during a weather-related disaster or earthquake. More than 30



© sallygirl | Bigstock

**If the weather forces you to evacuate, do you know what options are available for bringing your cat with you?**

states have signed on, so to speak, by incorporating the needs of pets into their plans for what to do in the event of a disaster.

The law was enacted in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. An estimated 100,000 cats and other pets were separated from their families during and after that awful storm, with as many as 70,000 dying. Who can't remember

the heartbreaking images of both pets and people stranded on rooftops and pets alone in trees, or the stories of people who brought their pets to evacuation buses only to be told their animals had to be left behind?

But even with the law, you still need to know the options in your community, in addition to taking common sense precautions. Here are some tips.

- Find out from your municipality or local Red Cross chapter if in the event of a disaster there will be emergency pet-friendly housing — shelters or other facilities that will allow companion animals. If not, see what hotels or motels allow pets. Hotels are not required to take pets in a disaster.
- Create a portable emergency kit that includes your pet's identification and medical records, food, water, bowls, and any medicine he may take. Just keep it in a closet or other spot where you can grab it.
- If you've got to go, take your cat's favorite blanket or other toy — something to bring him a little emotional comfort in the midst of all the anxiety. 🐾

## Compassionate Care for Your Best Friend

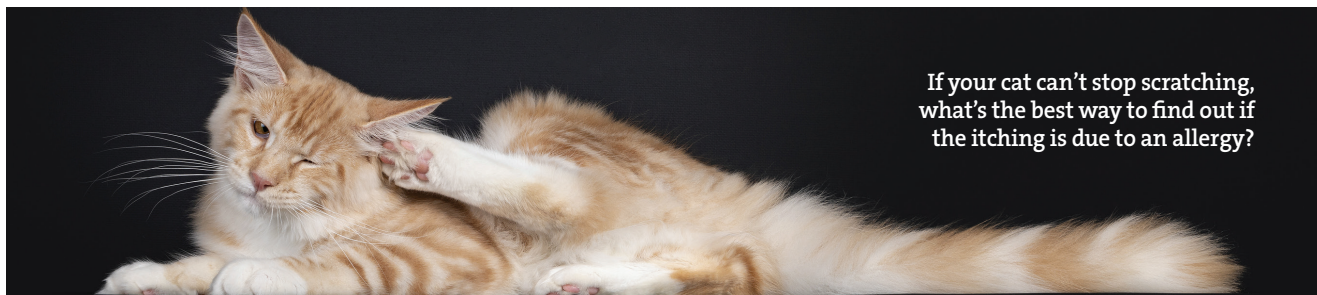
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If your cat can't stop scratching, what's the best way to find out if the itching is due to an allergy?

©Nynkevan Halbe | iStock

## Correcting Misconceptions About Allergy Testing in Cats

*Blood test or skin prick test? Neither.*

**P**eople often wonder which is better for diagnosing allergies in a cat: skin prick tests or blood tests. The answer: neither one.

For one thing, prick tests are not performed on cats. Rather, sometimes cats with suspected allergies undergo what is called intradermal testing. The difference is that with a skin prick test, a physician will put a drop of the allergen (the offending substance) right on a person's skin and then scratch it by pushing around the applicator a little bit to see if the skin flares. Intradermal tests done on cats, by contrast, put potential allergens *under* the skin with a needle and then look for reactions in the form of wheals — red, swollen marks. The cat has to be shaved over part of her body and also sedated.

For all that, it is not easy to assess the results of intradermal testing in felines. But a blood test does work similarly in cats and people, so it is more commonly performed. A bit of blood is drawn and then sent to the lab to check for antibodies to different allergens.

But neither blood tests nor intradermal tests are supposed to be used as diagnostic tools for determining what substances a cat is allergic to. Why not?

"A cat can be found to have results from those tests that technically read positive for an allergy to a substance,

but she may not suffer an allergic reaction that includes itchiness or other symptoms," says Tufts veterinary dermatologist Ramón Almela, DVM. "It just means your pet is sensitized or has simply been exposed to the allergen."

What it comes down to is that because of a positive result, you can end up with a situation where you're treating an allergy, but not the one that's making the animal miserable. And maybe there's no allergic reaction at all. Maybe the cat is itchy or uncomfortable because of a disease that has nothing to do with an allergy.

"It's a challenging situation from a communications standpoint," Dr. Almela says. "It's very important to explain to clients why these allergen tests are not reliable for diagnosis and address misconceptions about them."

### The only way to properly diagnose an allergy

Unfortunately, there's no simple test for figuring out what substance(s) a cat is allergic to and then treating from there. Diagnosing an allergy is often an indirect process that requires time and patience.

For instance, if a food allergy is suspected, the only way to find out for sure is by completely removing the ingredient(s) in question for an average of 6 to 8 weeks and feeding

your pet a different food (called an elimination diet) during that time. If symptoms resolve, you then put your cat back on the old diet and see if she flares up again. If she does, then she likely has a food allergy.

It's easier said than done, with no flavored medications allowed, no treats, nothing the kids drop on the floor, no flavored toothpaste during the trial. Any of those could contain the ingredient in question, or another ingredient that could cause symptoms and muddy the results.

If airborne allergens are suspected of causing the symptoms — pollen, dust, mold — the veterinarian has to conduct a thorough clinical examination and take a complete history to arrive at a diagnosis of exclusion. In other words, allergies are often discovered by ruling out all other possibilities for a cat's symptoms. It's the same for diagnosing an allergy to parasites, such as fleas. It's frequently discovered that the uncomfortable symptoms aren't an allergic reaction but, rather, a bacterial infection or a skin condition that's causing the itchiness.

### Are blood tests or intradermal tests ever called for?

You can very reasonably wonder, based on the proper way to diagnose allergies in a cat, whether blood or under-the-skin tests for allergens are ever appropriate. The answer is yes, sometimes — but increasingly infrequently.

It has to do with the treatment chosen once the doctor has determined that a particular allergy is in fact causing a cat to suffer symptoms. At this time, there are three treatment

*continued on page 5*

**Allergy Testing** *continued from page 4*  
options to relieve allergies in cats, Dr. Almela says:

- **Apoquel™** — A drug given in pill form to block allergic itching at the source. (It's off-label for cats but used widely, with good results.)
- **Cyclosporine** — An immunosuppressant drug also given orally that suppresses the immune system and thereby blunts the allergic response. (This is probably the most often used treatment for allergies in cats.)
- **Immunotherapy** — A treatment in which injections or under-the-tongue administration of small amounts of the offending allergen are given to desensitize a cat's system and reduce the likelihood of an allergic reaction.

Only one of these treatments, immunotherapy, requires a blood test or an intradermal test. In such cases, once an allergy has been diagnosed, either of those tests can help a veterinarian determine which allergens should go into the injections other than the symptom-causing allergen itself.

"We don't know exactly how immunotherapy works," Dr. Almela comments, "but the hypothesis is that it 'teaches' the immune system to stay 'calm' in the allergens' presence. Unfortunately, to see a benefit you might have to wait several months, even a year in some cases."

Why would someone choose immunotherapy for their cat when the other medications tend to work much more quickly — sometimes as soon as the day of administration — and much more reliably?

"Actually, the trend is away from immunotherapy," Dr. Almela says. "There will always be a place for it because it is the safest of the three treatments. Other treatments may be contraindicated for certain cats; there can be untoward side effects. But still, it's not used as commonly as it once was."

"A couple of decades ago, immunotherapy was one of the only options out there. We didn't have all the tools we have now, which work faster in a cat — and also better, with a success rate of about 80 percent as opposed to about 60 or 65 percent for immunotherapy. So what is happening now is that fewer clients are choosing immunotherapy for their cats. I used to be

asked by clients to treat allergic cats with immunotherapy much more frequently even a decade ago. The upshot is that blood tests and intradermal tests in allergic cats for the purpose of formulating an immunotherapy treatment with specific amounts of various substances are becoming less and less commonplace."

### Bottom line

If your cat is diagnosed with an allergy and you decide to try immunotherapy — perhaps with input from the veterinarian that one or more of the other treatments might disagree with your pet — a blood test or an intradermal test to check for the presence of specific allergen antibodies is appropriate in order for the doctor to be able to mix the right combination of substances for the immunotherapy trial. But if you and the doctor are talking about those tests up front, even before it is known that your cat even has an allergy, you could be identifying a problem substance that is not actually causing allergic reactions in your pet — and wasting money in the process. 🐾

**Next month:** *How to quell symptoms if you have an allergy — to your cat.*

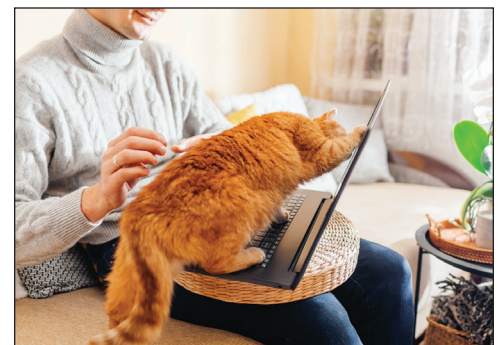
## THE BOND

# Cat Likes the Laptop

*Why they want to get in the way.*

**A** number of people have written to tell us that their cat likes to sit on something they're trying to look at: a newspaper, a computer keyboard, whatever. Take it as a compliment. When a cat comes between you and the thing you're interested in, *she* becomes the thing you're interested in. That is, she's telling you to pay attention to her, or even that she just wants to hang out with you.

One person wrote to say that he works at home and is baffled that his cat comes over to sit right on his laptop around 7 pm each evening but not at other times. Why might she do that? It could be that by that point she's ready for some interaction. After all, the person presumably has already been working all day. Also, especially at this time of year, dusk sets in around 7 pm. And sunset (and sunrise) are the



**Just when you're on deadline with that big report, your cat decides it's "we" time.**

times of day cats are most naturally active. So wanting some interaction at that point could be a reflection of her natural biorhythm. 🐾

# Having Your Cat Tested for COVID

*Guidelines for determining whether your cat has the virus.*

**W**ith reports of pets becoming sick from COVID-19, you might very well wonder whether it is appropriate for your cat to be tested for the disease. Perhaps she is having respiratory signs like sneezing or shortness of breath, or she has been in close contact with someone who has tested positive.

Despite concerns, neither the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) nor the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) believes that routine testing of pets is appropriate at this time. There are actually very few reports of cats having become infected with the virus, and even fewer reports of cats having actually become ill. That said, there are instances in which testing might be called for.

## The right situation to test a cat for the disease

The AVMA lists a number of signs of illness in cats that could be suggestive of infection with COVID.

- fever
- coughing
- difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- lethargy
- sneezing
- nasal or eye discharge
- vomiting
- diarrhea

If your pet exhibits any of these symptoms, you should of course bring her to the veterinarian. But the doctor's first order of business will not be to administer a COVID test. Many other diseases and conditions — ones that are much more common than COVID — can lead to these signs of illness in pets, and the doctor will first rule out all those other causes. Only



**Do not put a mask on your cat, whether for fun or education. It could harm her.**

if your cat is negative for any of the other conditions might she be considered a candidate for the test.

The veterinarian will not make the decision on her own. The AVMA says the choice on whether to submit a cat to COVID testing should be made collaboratively between the doctor and local, state, and/or federal public health officials as well as animal health officials. If a test is

## When To End Your Cat's Home Isolation

**In the very unlikely event that your cat does contract COVID, she must be isolated at home, just like a person. Always ask your vet how long the isolation must last, but in general, says the CDC, she can go back to normal activities if she has not shown symptoms for 72 hours without medical care or if it has been at least 14 days since her last positive test.**

deemed necessary and comes back positive, the results should be confirmed by a USDA National Veterinary Services Laboratory.

Another situation in which a COVID test for your pet might be deemed appropriate by your vet in consultation with other health authorities is one in which your cat has been in close contact with a known or suspected COVID-19 human patient, or exposed to a high-risk environment such as a nursing facility where an outbreak of the virus took place. But again, it's not as though a cat who has been exposed to someone with COVID becomes an automatic candidate for testing. The vet will determine the best course of action depending on such factors as the cat's current state of health.

## What if my cat contracts COVID

The good news is that most cats who come is that most cats who come down with COVID end up with mild symptoms that can be treated at home, the CDC points out. It is "extremely rare" for cats to end up with serious illness.

Other good news is that the risk of cats spreading the illness to people is quite low. Unfortunately for cats, the same is not necessarily true about the illness spreading from people to them. While relatively few cats have been infected with COVID, it has been mostly after close contact with people who had it. For that reason, the CDC advises that if you come down with the virus, you should avoid contact with your cat, just like you would with people. Contact includes petting, snuggling, kissing, sharing food, and sleeping in the same bed, the federal agency says. Of course, someone else should be taking the cat to the veterinarian, if need be, although your veterinarian might offer a telemedicine consult for treating a sick cat. 🐾

# Your Cat Is Talking. Are You Listening?

*Interpreting feline vocalizations.*



Some cats, when they see a bird, make a birdlike sound. It may be more out of frustration than to get the bird's attention.

Cats don't have a language center in their brains, which means they don't communicate with words per se. But their vocalizations have meanings. If you listen carefully, you can tell whether your cat is hungry, angry, feeling affectionate, impatient, or in pain. Here's a rundown.

**Meow.** Cats don't meow to each other, unless they're kittens plaintively letting their mothers know they need to nurse or require some other form of care and attention. Once a kitten reaches adulthood, she meows only for people. Different meows have different meanings, and you can probably discern those meanings by gauging the intensity of the vocalization and the context. There's the "Hello, I missed you and need some attention" meow and the more insistent "Feed me now" meow, for instance. Some

cat owners are also familiar with the "Here's your mouse" meow and the "I want to come up" meow. It's generally not hard to get the hang of what a meow is alerting you to.

**Purr.** This one can be trickier than meets the ear. Yes, a purr often signals extreme contentment — but not always. A cat might also purr when she is stressed or in pain. The low frequency of the vibrations inside her body can apparently ease breathing. Some also posit that purring in such a situation is like a child sucking her thumb. Whatever the reason, context is all for determining whether the purring means something good or bad.

*Note:* If you hear a high-frequency sound in the purring — something that might sound a little like the cry of a human baby that needs tending — it likely means your cat wants you to do something for her, like feed her. (Indeed, it is hard to ignore something that sounds a little like a baby crying; our instinct, genetically honed over millennia, is to do whatever it takes to make that sound stop.)

**Chirps and Trills.** These high-pitched sounds, similar to the soft rolling *rrrs* of Spanish, are the sounds a mother cat uses to tell her kittens to follow her. When your pet directs these vocalizations at you, it probably means she wants you to follow her — perhaps to her food bowl. Sometimes, however, a trill could mean your cat appreciates you, perhaps for offering her a desired treat.

Interestingly, while cats don't meow to each other, they do call out to their feline brethren by chirping and trilling. What they are communicating is for them to know and us to find out.

**Hissing.** It means what you think it means, especially since a hiss is generally uttered with a cat's mouth open and teeth bared. The cat is angry or fearful — or both. Do not try to calm a hissing cat. Just keep away. She needs time to regain her composure on her own.

**Growling.** See hissing. The low, rumbling sound is a warning. A cat's territoriality may be involved in addition to fear or anger. Do not try to reason with a growling cat or get her to come around. Treat the growl like the cat's decision to have a time-out — wherever and for however long she decides.

**Yowl or Howl.** Kind of like a loud, drawn out meow, a yowl or howl can signal a number of different things. If your pet has not been spayed or neutered, the howling could indicate a desire to mate (and, quite frankly, sounds quite annoying to human ears). If the aim isn't to mate, a yowl could very well mean your cat is in distress. Perhaps she

*continued on page 8*

## Which Cats Talk the Most?

Cats who live in homes with people tend to vocalize more than feral felines. In other words, if you were to ask a cat, "You talkin' to me?" the answer would likely be yes. Similarly, research suggests that pet cats make more sounds than other carnivores. It's kind of amazing when you think about it — that cats reserve their voices largely for us.

Kittens are apt to "talk" more than adult cats, perhaps because they have more needs and more of a sense of bewilderment. And if the kitten is a Siamese or Burmese, be prepared for a lot of listening. Those breeds tend to be more vocally communicative at all stages of life.

**Talking Cat** *continued from page 7*  
has been inadvertently locked in the basement and wants out. Or maybe she's in pain and wants you to fix it. Older cats also yowl and howl sometimes because they have a medical condition such as hyperthyroidism or feline cognitive disorder and are feeling disoriented. If your cat howls or yowls for unknown reasons, make sure to have her veterinarian rule out medical problems.

**Chattering, Chittering, or Twittering.** These bird-like sounds may occur when your cat is watching — you guessed it — a bird, or perhaps a

squirrel or other rodent. Stephanie Borns-Weil, DVM, head of the Tufts Animal Behavior Service, believes that the sound is an expression of frustration when a kitty's predatory drive is thwarted. 🐾

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- **Behavior:** Does your cat do things to you out of spite?
- **Emergency Medicine:** Where will you take your cat in an off-hours emergency?
- **The Bond:** You're allergic to your cat but won't give her up. What's the best way to tamp down on symptoms?

## DEAR DOCTOR

### Cat hates belly rubs

**Q** My cat likes to roll over and expose her belly. But when I try to respond by stroking it, she scratches and bites. What am I doing wrong?

**Leland Morse**  
Brookline, Massachusetts

Dear Mr. Morse,

**A** What you're doing wrong is trying to stroke your cat's belly. She is not presenting it to you as a sign that you should touch here there. She is probably just feeling safe, relaxed, and trusting in your presence.

The hair follicles on a cat's belly, unlike a dog's, are much more sensitive than elsewhere on the feline body. Thus, when you touch them, it could feel like you are pulling at them — or simply providing more tactile sensation than your cat enjoys. In fact, while some cats do enjoy belly rubs, they usually do not enjoy them for long.

We should note that some cats don't like having their bellies rubbed out of an instinct for protecting their abdominal organs. Then, too, in the wild, a cat might turn over on her back specifically so she can get into better position for using her teeth and claws to fend off an attacker.

### New diet not agreeing with cat

**Q** We needed to switch our cat to a different diet to help manage her heart disease, but I can see after only a couple of days that it's making her sick. Her stomach is gurgling, and she has diarrhea. How are we supposed to slow the course of her disease with food when

the therapeutic diet is something her body can't tolerate?

**Avery Hutchins**  
Flagstaff, Arizona

Dear Ms. Hutchins,

**A** There's a very good chance that it's not the food making your cat sick but the fact that you didn't switch from the old food to the new one gradually. It takes most cats at least a week to adjust, starting on day 1 with 90 percent old food and 10 percent new, then gradually changing the ratio until she's at 90 percent new food by day 6.

Your cat may still have some GI issues after a week, but they should be calming down. You can go back to a little more of the old food and less of the new if she needs more time to adjust.

Of course, if even with a gradual switch your pet is still having problems, talk to the vet. There are usually several different brands of foods that can be used to deal with a particular medical situation, and if one doesn't agree with your cat, another will. 🐾



Some cats like to present their bellies. But it doesn't necessarily mean they want a belly rub.

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