

Anorexia and Food Aversion

When normal individuals are deprived of food the basal metabolic rate is down-regulated, so the requirement for calories is reduced. (This explains why it is so difficult to lose weight by dieting!) In starvation, blood glucose levels are maintained in the short term (24-48 hrs) by utilisation of glycogen stored in the liver. Following this period, fat is broken down to supply energy. Most body tissues can utilise alternative (non-glucose) energy sources, but some tissues such as the central nervous system depend on glucose, which is provided by protein breakdown.

In disease, the normal response to starvation is altered because there is an increased requirement for calories and protein. For example:

- Tissue repair
- Immune response
- Neoplastic tissue
- Fever

This causes an accelerated form of starvation called protein energy malnutrition, (PEM). PEM causes all sorts of problems, not least to the immune system and nutritional support is therefore indicated in patients with or at risk of developing PEM.

Not all inappetent dogs and cats require nutritional support and it is not always easy to identify those that do. Guidelines for intervention include:

- Loss of 10% bodyweight during the preceding 1-2 weeks
- Anorexia of 3 days' duration in cats, and 5-6 days in dogs. (Cats cannot down-regulate the liver enzymes that break down proteins to conserve protein so earlier intervention is required).

To manage an anorexic patient appropriately, the cause must be found. For cats, the environment in which they are kept is vital to their wellbeing. They should not be stressed and must be offered food that they enjoy and are used to eating. Warming the food is useful because it brings out the smell.

Food aversion may develop in cats if they are offered food at the same time that they are in pain, vomiting or feeling nauseous. Neither pain nor nausea may be obvious and trial treatment may be considered in making a diagnosis. Cats may make an association with that food and continue to refuse to eat it even when they have recovered. Therefore it is not a good idea to "try everything" when a cat is off its food without knowing why, because this may make it more difficult to find something it will eat when it is feeling better.

It is now considered preferable to provide nutritional support via tube feeding; force feeding should be avoided.

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