



Inappetence in dogs

Tips to encourage eating

By Ness Bird – Nutrition Adviser and RVN

Dental problems, illness and pain are some of the reasons why dogs may become inappetent. Veterinary advice should initially be sought to rule out a medical cause over a behavioural issue.

Well-meaning owners will often supplement a complete diet with extras in order to make the meal more interesting. Some clever dogs soon learn that they can eat the new food and leave the kibble, resulting in owners drawing the conclusion that the dog is not enjoying the main diet. Changing to another brand of food often leads to the dog happily eating the alternative for several days, weeks or months before it too becomes uninteresting to them. This in turn ends with an owner trying numerous brands of dog food with varying degrees of success and with the dog dictating what is fed and when. The more choice that you offer a fussy eater, the worse the problem can become.

Fortunately, this problem can be solved relatively quickly. The following tips may help you.

1. Choose a complete food that is energy dense

Ensure the diet is suitable for the age group and activity level of your dog, and that the kibble size of dry food is appropriate. Concentrated products with a high calorie content can be effective since the smaller feeding portions may be more acceptable to a dog with a low appetite.

2. Feed smaller meals more often

Inappetent dogs are more likely to eat most or all of a smaller meal than they are of a large one. You will need to train yourself to pick up any uneaten food within about 30 minutes of it being offered. Knowing that the next meal is not too far away makes this psychologically easier for you as you will naturally be worried that your dog will become hungry in a few hours if the food has not been eaten.

3. Understanding behaviour

Some behaviours are learned and reinforced by the familiarity of a routine, so sometimes altering the normal pattern of activity that occurs in the run up to a mealtime can help. You could try using a different bowl, feeding at different times and/or in different rooms, or even utilise another member of the household to prepare the meal.





4. Do not give additional treats

The most common behavioural cause of inappetence is simply that the dog isn't hungry. Additions to the main diet can contribute significant calories once added together. Try cutting out all extras and also reduce the main diet for a few days to give your dog back an "edge" of hunger. This may sound strict, but it is usually very effective. Once the routine is back in place and feeding becomes less of an issue, you can afford to be more flexible.

5. Introduce new food gradually

A new diet should be introduced gradually. Ensure the two products are mixed well to help prevent your dog from differentiating. Soaking dry food for up to 30 minutes prior to serving makes combining the foods easier and also enhances the aroma.

6. Address stress

Your own behaviour can impact on your dog's behaviour, so try to keep calm at mealtimes. It can sometimes help to revert to a food that is known to be enjoyed for a few days to limit stress. When mealtimes are happy times once again, then is the time to start gradually introducing your preferred product and employing some of the other strategies listed here if need be.

7. Be aware of environmental issues

Are there other animals in the household that compete for your dog's food? Is a tag making a distracting noise hitting against the bowl? Are plastic bowls holding residues from detergents? Are hormonal changes a possibility? Have there been any unsettling environmental changes e.g. storms, a new baby or a house move?

8. Make mealtime fun

One of the most effective ways to beat stress is to play. Interactive feeding toys can be very effective in encouraging an inappetent dog to eat. This provides a novel vessel for the food and may help break the habit of leaving food if the behaviour is triggered by familiar stimuli such as the usual bowl.

9. Adolescent dogs

A natural decline in appetite can often be quite normal in adolescence, because as puppies get older their growth rate slows down, and the demand for those extra calories needed for growth starts to wane off. This is why the Arden Grange feeding guides show some reductions for the later age groups for puppies and smaller feed portions for adults. Do review the volume, sometimes a small reduction is the simple solution.

10. Attention seeking

Your dog may have learned that refusing food means more fuss and attention. You can combat this by ignoring him when he is not eating, and praising him when he does.

