
Is Your Dog a Picky Eater? Find Out Why and What You Can Do



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If your dog only sniffs at their food, takes one bite and then walks away, or never comes to their bowl at all, you may have a picky eater. Picky eating is not unusual in dogs, but it's still tough to understand why your dog doesn't want to eat and what to do about it.

This guide can help you identify if your dog is a picky eater, why they won't eat, and how to encourage them to enjoy their food once again.

Key Takeaways

1. Dogs who are picky eaters might refuse food regularly, prefer certain textures over others, or not finish what's in their bowl.
2. Dogs might also be considered picky if they only eat when they're hand-fed or refuse to eat until you give them something different.
3. Common triggers for picky eating include stress caused by change in the environment, overeating between meals, and becoming bored with their regular food.
4. Help your dog overcome picky eating by making their mealtimes more regular, adding variety to their meals, creating a more engaging mealtime, and reducing treats.

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Signs Your Dog Is a Picky Eater

Your dog might be a picky eater if you notice one or more of these signs:

- **Abandoning their meals:** Your dog comes to the bowl initially but then walks away. They may sniff it before they leave or even move it around with their nose or mouth.
- **Only eating certain parts of their meal:** Your dog cherry-picks certain pieces of food, but leaves others (often with different textures or flavors) behind.
- **Grazing:** It takes a long time for your dog to finish a meal.
- **Refusing to eat unless you hand-feed them:** Feeding your dog from your hand is the only way they'll eat.
- **Requiring special mixes:** "Plain" food doesn't do it for your dog anymore. They need special additions thrown into the mix.
- **Eating treats but not regular dog food:** Treats excite your dog, but regular food does not.
- **Skipping meals:** Your dog will eat one meal, like breakfast, but then won't eat the other.

Common Picky Eating Patterns

Pattern	What It Looks Like	Best Approach
Texture Selective	Eats wet, refuses dry (or opposite)	Gradually mix textures over 7-10 days
Flavor Boredom	Used to love food, now walks away	Rotate between 2-3 proteins monthly (don't forget to gradually mix in the new protein even if feeding the same brand)
Attention Seeking	Only eats when owner helps	Set timer, leave room during meals
Grazer	Nibbles throughout day	Strict 15-minute meal windows
Treat Spoiled	Refuses meals, begs for treats	Eliminate all treats for a certain time period
Environmental	Won't eat in certain locations/situations	Create consistent, quiet feeding space

Why Are Some Dogs Picky Eaters?

Spoiled Appetite

One of the most straightforward culprits of picky eating is a spoiled appetite. Your dog may simply be too full at mealtime. If you're training your dog and using treats for

reinforcement, you may be unintentionally filling them up between meals.

This is especially true if you give your dog high-value treats, like cheese and meat. They may prefer these treats to their regular kibble or wet food. They might even “hold out” at mealtime, hoping you’ll get the picture and give them the good stuff!

Age

Your dog may be exhibiting age-specific picky eating behaviors. Here’s what that might look like at different life stages:

- Puppies may reject foods initially as they learn about new tastes and textures.
- Adult dogs tend to become picky if they’re on an inconsistent feeding schedule.
- Seniors might need to transition from hard, crunchy food to softer textures because of new dental sensitivities or a reduced sense of smell.

New Home or Major Routine Change

Your dog might be balking at their food because of a disruption in their life. Whether you’re in the midst of a move, adopting another dog, or shifting their usual schedule, try to be patient.

Dogs often need time to adjust to new locations or schedules. Once their routine is consistent and predictable, they’ll probably return to their normal eating habits.

Stress and Anxiety

When your dog feels stress, their body releases hormones that suppress their appetite. This usually lasts between three and five days, or until they feel more secure and the newness around them begins to feel familiar.

In addition to the environmental triggers above (moving, adding to the family, weather changes, and shifting schedules), there are other reasons why your dog might experience stress.

They might feel anxiety when [new people](#), new pets, or a new baby come into your home. The dynamics of their space change, and they may need time to get used to the new sounds and smells that come with strangers.

If a week goes by and your dog still seems stressed, it's a good idea to check in with your veterinarian.

Boredom



If you've run through all of the possible reasons your dog has become a picky eater and none of them seem to fit, the reason may be that they've simply gotten bored with the same flavor or texture of food. Try changing it up within the same brand family.

What to Do If Your Dog Is a Picky Eater

Try a New Food or a New Way of Serving It

If you think your dog is tired of their usual food, you can try rotating flavors within the same brand family. But be slow and intentional about it. Gradually mix the familiar flavor with the new one to prevent an upset stomach.

You can also try warming up your dog's [wet food](#) to enhance its aroma. And if your dog eats kibble, try mixing in a little water or broth to make it more appealing.

Create Set Meal Times

Feed at the same time morning and night, and only leave the food available for a limited time. If your dog eats within the timeframe, great. If not, removing it might change their behavior at the next meal.

To help them stick with the routine, try not to give your dog snacks or treats between meals. You want your dog to be hungry when it's time for a meal!

Give Them Plenty of Exercise



Give your dog [exercise](#) to stimulate their appetite. Regular walks, playtime, and any other activity that your dog can do with you all help keep them on a successful eating schedule.

Make Sure You're Not Overfeeding

Sometimes, too much food can throw your dog's appetite off. Make sure you follow the

measurement guidelines on the dog food packaging, and avoid giving your dog free rein to eat.

Make Mealtimes More Fun

Puzzle feeders and slow-feed bowls are designed to slow your dog's eating speed and stimulate their brain. This combination can turn a picky eater into an engaged one!

You can buy many different puzzle feeders and slow-feed bowls in a variety of shapes, sizes, and styles. You can also make one yourself by putting a tennis ball or other safe obstruction into your dog's bowl.

Consult Your Veterinarian

If your dog exhibits picky behaviors for more than a week or you're worried about them at any point, get in touch with your veterinarian. A check-up to rule out issues like dental pain and digestive problems is always a good idea.

Remember to bring your dog's feeding history with you, such as the food they eat, their eating patterns, and a list of what changes you've noticed.

Be Patient With Your Picky Eater!



There are many reasons why your dog might suddenly become a picky eater. If you're patient, you can pinpoint the cause behind their picky eating and try some of our suggestions for getting your pet excited about eating again.

You might also consider giving your dog [CESAR® food](#) for a gourmet meal with nutrition you can trust.

And don't forget to stick to a consistent meal schedule, avoid giving too many treats, and make sure your dog gets the exercise they need. They'll be back to gobbling up their food before you know it!

Contributor

Jessica Gilliam is a veterinarian with more than 14 years of clinical experience, specializing in small animal medicine. She is passionate about surgery, dentistry, mentorship, and

education. Jessica serves as the Community Chair for the Tennessee Market at Banfield and oversees Mars Petcare's PetConnect chat, which offers free educational support for pet parents. In her free time, she enjoys hiking and baking

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1. **How can I prevent my dog from becoming a picky eater?**

If you get your dog when they're a puppy, you can teach them consistent feeding routines from the start. Feed them at the same time and place every day, don't give them alternatives if they initially refuse to eat, and only give them treats while you're training them.

If your dog is a little older or they develop a picky eating habit, you can try the suggestions we made above, including sticking to a feeding routine, cutting back on treats, making mealtime fun, and trying new flavors.

2. **What's the best way to stop my dog's begging and table-scrap feeding?**

The best way to stop your dog from begging is to never respond to it at all. Make sure your whole family is on the same page with this policy. Even one response can reinforce the behavior.

You can also try feeding your dog before your family meals so you know they're not hungry. If they're persistent, consider putting them in a separate room. And if you have time, teach your dog a "place" command, meaning they stay in a particular place while you eat.

3. Is seasonal appetite change normal?

Some dogs naturally eat less when it's hot in the summer and more in cold winter temperatures. If your dog does this, just make sure their weight stays consistent and their health and energy are normal.

If you're worried about any changes to your dog's appetite, it's always a good idea to check in with your veterinarian.

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