



©ChristopherBernard | Getty Images

# What to Do When Your Dog Won't Eat

BY ELIZABETH ANDERSON LOPEZ

**M**any of us have challenging relationships with food — why can't we crave carrots instead of chocolate?! Dogs aren't immune to this, though they aren't likely to dive into a pint of ice cream after a bad breakup. Instead, they may stop eating entirely. Thankfully, we have some experts to weigh in on issues involving a new lack of interest in food.

Christine Caplan, a certified veterinary technician with AKC Pet Insurance ([akcpetinsurance.com](http://akcpetinsurance.com)) based in Portland, Oregon, says there are five main factors that may cause dogs to not eat:

- ❖ **Medical conditions:** An appetite stimulant may be necessary if your dog is recovering from a health issue.
- ❖ **Surgery:** It can take days before your dog's appetite returns to normal.
- ❖ **Medications:** Many medications can cause inappetence, and this is very common when opioids are taken.
- ❖ **Aging:** Seniors can lose their appetite due to illnesses or dulling senses. Many seniors just aren't hungry.
- ❖ **Stress:** Any change or move can cause stress and GI upset.

Keep in mind, too, frequency is key here. "If the dog misses one meal I wouldn't be too worried, but if the problem persists past that, a good medical exam and lab work is certainly recommended," says Dr. Judy Morgan, 2019 Veterinary Hero Award Nominee and founder and CEO of Dr. Judy Morgan's Naturally Healthy Pets ([drjudymorgan.com](http://drjudymorgan.com)), based in Wendell, North Carolina.

Lori Head, Missouri-based head of U.S. operations for Tonisity, maker of DoggyRade ([us.doggyrade.com](http://us.doggyrade.com)), adds that although "a loss of appetite in dogs doesn't necessarily indicate serious issues, prompt veterinary attention is important and advised, especially a refusal to eat in dogs that usually eat

well." She lists dental disease, recent vaccinations and being in unfamiliar surroundings as other potential causes for dogs to stop eating.

Reasons your dog may stop eating can range from being picky to sickly. So, what is the solution?

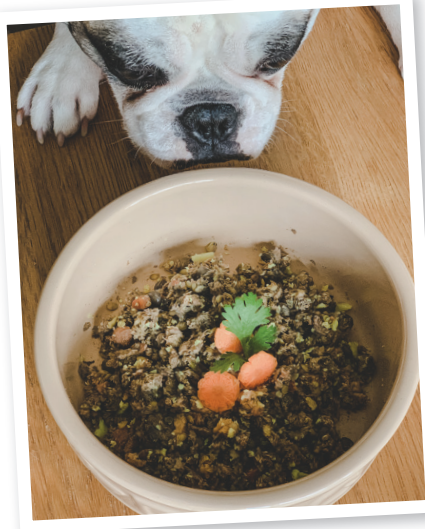
## Help for medical issues

"If your dog's loss of appetite is caused by illness, your vet may recommend a prescription diet to meet your pet's nutritional needs, while underlying issues are being addressed and identified," Lori says.

Dog parents who have put their dog on a prescription diet may notice a new lack of interest in food.

"Sometimes these prescription diets are not especially tasty, especially if your dog is used to regular treats or people food," Lori explains. "In some cases, your vet may prescribe an appetite-stimulating medication, recommend syringe-feeding a liquid diet or possibly add a meal enhancer."

Think of those enhancers as the canine equivalent of adding a bit of cheese sauce to broccoli to get a child to eat some veggies. Often called "meal toppers," they can make a meal taste better while not adding many calories. (No, cheese sauce is not on the list.) They include: →



❖ **Broth.** Look for sodium-free versions of bone or chicken broth. There are broths specifically made for dogs with probiotics and other benefits.

❖ **Seasonal veggies.** Try green beans, carrots and sweet potatoes, for example. Canned is fine, as long as it's salt-free. Canned pumpkin (not pumpkin pie mix!) has lots of other health benefits. Experiment with textures, too. A dog who doesn't like a crunchy carrot may eat a cooked/softened one.

❖ **Protein.** A little bit of hard-boiled egg or minced bits of unseasoned chicken breast go a long way. Thoroughly mix them with the kibble, so your dog doesn't just eat the treat on top.

❖ **Cook it up.** Whether you use canned food or moistened kibble, warming it up — maybe even baking it

until it forms a crust — can make something old new again.

Keep your vet involved in whatever you select. "If the diet is due to a health condition like heart disease, then talk to your vet about toppers or anything other than a prescription canned diet or prescription kibble," Christine says.

There are also more and more fresh and frozen diets on the market; see if your vet recommends them as a good option. "I never recommend prescription diets," states Dr. Morgan. "Owners can make their own diets instead. There are companies that make gently cooked 'prescription' diets made with human-grade foods that are much more palatable."

### Help for nonmedical issues

"If it's medical, the pet owner needs to defer to their vet," Christine says. "But if it's behavioral, it's important to explore different types of food, from toppers to a fresh food diet. You can also try feeding on a lick mat or a food mat versus a bowl."

Once a medical issue has been ruled out, Lori suggests things you can do when your dog won't eat:

1. Cut back on treats.
2. Feed on a regular schedule.
3. Make mealtime fun time, such as playing with a toy that dispenses food, or rewarding your dog with food for doing a trick.
4. Take your dog for a walk before mealtime.

5. Change your dog's feeding situation; try feeding her alone if you have other animals.

6. Try different bowls or plates at different heights to see what Fido prefers.

You may opt for an assist from a pro, and there's nothing wrong with that. "Working with a certified trainer or behaviorist is best if your dog is boycotting and you've ruled out medical issues," Christine advises. "If stress is the reason, a trainer can help determine why this is happening and how to resolve this issue."

### Never starve it out

Whatever the reason for inappetence, we've all heard the "The dog will eat when she's hungry" attitude, but that isn't advised. In fact, Dr. Morgan calls this a horrible solution. "A pet should never be starved. Waiting them out for 24 hours is fine. For puppies, no more than 12 hours."

Dogs and people can have similarities with food, including skipping a meal for no real reason. But having these tools at the ready can help you determine if it is truly an issue and if so, what to do. 🐾

*Elizabeth Anderson Lopez is an award-winning writer based in California. She and her husband have three rescue Bull Terriers. Dexter will eat his kibble and anything else (including paper); Tosh likes carrots but no other veggies; and Maybelene won't eat unless there is a fresh or freeze-dried topper added. Contact Elizabeth at [fromconcepttocontent.com](mailto:fromconcepttocontent.com).*



## SIGNS THAT SPOT DOESN'T FEEL WELL

Your dog may give you some clues that she isn't eating because she isn't feeling well. "Sometimes they realize a particular flavor (or protein) does not agree with them," Dr. Morgan says, adding that a sick dog will usually show some of the following signs:

- lethargy
- vomiting
- making a lot of stomach noise
- drooling
- lip-licking
- diarrhea
- burping