

Elimination Diet Trials in Dogs and Cats: Finding the Source of Food Allergies

If your dog or cat has ongoing itching, ear infections, or digestive upset, a **food allergy** could be the cause. But figuring out exactly *which* ingredient is responsible isn't always easy.

That's where an **elimination diet trial** comes in — a carefully controlled feeding plan designed to identify food allergies and help your pet feel better.

What Is a Food Allergy?

A food allergy happens when your pet's immune system overreacts to a specific ingredient in their diet, most often a **protein** (such as chicken, beef, fish, or dairy).

These allergies can develop at any age — even if your pet has been eating the same food for years.

Common signs of food allergies include:

- Itchy skin, especially around the face, ears, feet, and belly
- Recurrent ear infections
- Red, irritated skin or excessive licking
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- Poor coat quality or hair loss

Because these symptoms can also occur with **environmental allergies or skin infections**, an elimination diet trial helps determine whether food is part of the problem.

What Is an Elimination Diet Trial?

An elimination diet trial is a **diagnostic test** — not just a diet change.

It involves feeding your pet a **special diet** that contains ingredients your pet has **never eaten before**, or ingredients that have been **hydrolyzed** (broken down so the immune system doesn't recognize them as allergens).

By eliminating potential triggers, the body has a chance to heal.

If your pet's symptoms improve while on the special diet — and then return when the old food is reintroduced — a food allergy is confirmed.

Types of Diets Used

Your veterinarian may recommend one of two main types of diets for the trial:

1. Novel Protein Diet

This diet uses a protein and carbohydrate source your pet has never eaten before.

Examples include:

- **For dogs:** duck and potato, venison and pea, or rabbit and oats
- **For cats:** venison, duck, rabbit, or limited-ingredient formulas

These diets are usually available as **prescription foods**, since over-the-counter “limited ingredient” diets may be cross-contaminated during manufacturing.

2. Hydrolyzed Protein Diet

In these diets, proteins are broken down into tiny pieces (amino acids) that the immune system can't detect as allergens.

Hydrolyzed diets are very effective for both dogs and cats with suspected food allergies.

Your veterinarian will choose the best option based on your pet's history and symptoms.

How Long Does the Trial Last?

Patience is key — it takes time for allergic inflammation to calm down.

- The typical elimination diet trial lasts **8–12 weeks**.
- Some pets show improvement in just a few weeks, but full resolution can take longer.
- It's important to feed **only the prescribed diet** during this time — no treats, table scraps, flavored medications, or other foods.

Even a tiny amount of the old food can “reset” the clock, so strict compliance is crucial.

Rules for a Successful Trial

To get accurate results:

1. **Feed only the recommended diet.** No other foods, treats, or supplements unless approved by your vet.
2. **Check medications.** Some chewable tablets and flavored preventives contain proteins that can interfere with results.
3. **Avoid flavored toothpastes or treats.** Stick to vet-approved options.
4. **Feed separately** if you have multiple pets, so the allergic pet doesn't sneak other foods.
5. **Keep a journal** of your pet's symptoms — note changes in itching, ear health, bowel movements, and appetite.

The Challenge Phase

If your pet's symptoms improve during the elimination diet, your veterinarian may recommend a **"challenge" phase** — reintroducing the old food for a short period. If symptoms return within days or weeks, it confirms a **food allergy**.

From there, your vet can help you choose a **long-term diet** that avoids the offending ingredients.

After the Trial

Once your pet's food allergy is identified:

- You can feed the elimination diet long-term **or** transition to a maintenance diet with safe ingredients.
- Some pets may also have **environmental allergies**, so your vet will help manage any remaining symptoms.
- Regular check-ups ensure your pet's nutrition remains balanced and they stay healthy.

An elimination diet trial is the **gold standard** for diagnosing food allergies in dogs and cats. It requires commitment, but it's the best way to pinpoint which ingredients your pet reacts to — and to help them feel comfortable again.

With your veterinarian's guidance and your careful participation, you can uncover the cause of your pet's itching or digestive troubles and create a nutrition plan that keeps them healthy for years to come.