

Treat Therapeutic Diets as Medicine

Strategies to Encourage Compliance for Disease Management

By Wendy S. Myers

When our cat was diagnosed with kidney disease at age 16, our veterinarian prescribed a therapeutic diet. The diet significantly extended the quality and length of Ollie's life—taking him to 21 ! years.

What's your protocol for managing renal disease? A therapeutic diet will be the cornerstone of treatment, coupled with medical progress exams, routine blood work and urinalysis, supplements, and more. Research shows cats with kidney disease will live twice as long if they eat a renal diet instead of a maintenance diet.¹

Treat therapeutic diets as “medicine in a bag” or “medicine in a can.” This philosophical shift will help you gain better compliance from clients—and help patients live longer. Diets drive return visits. Therapeutic diets generate significant foot traffic, getting clients to return 10 times per year on average. During those 10 food transactions, receptionists can watch for alerts in your practice-management software to see if the patient is due for any professional services or products. Repeat visits help you maximize compliance.

Here's how to position therapeutic diets as medicine:

Identify your top prescribed diets. Run sales reports in your practice-management software to rank therapeutic diets by SKU. Let's say your top sales are weight management, renal disease, joint management, and dental health. Have veterinarians write protocols for how you'll manage the most frequently diagnosed diseases in your practice, including therapeutic diets as part of ongoing care.

Knowing your best-selling SKUs also gives you valuable merchandising information for your lobby. Think like a retailer and rearrange food displays with the most popular diets at eye level.



Dispense a new diet in the exam room. When an item is dispensed in the exam room, it's medicine. When it's sold at the front desk, it's retail. Veterinarians explain the disease diagnosis and treatment options in the exam room, followed by a technician who gives medication instructions. Along with medication, the technician should bring the new therapeutic diet into the exam room to explain how to do a proper food transition. Let's say a technician discharges a dental patient and explains antibiotics and home care. Bring a bag of Purina Veterinary Diets DH into the exam room. This elevates the importance of the diet, treating it as medicine in a bag.



Dispense bags and cases, not “starter cans.” Many veterinarians are guilty of sending home a few brands of canned renal diets, telling the client, “See which one your cat likes.” Instead, dispense a case or bag. Remember, your diets have a 100% satisfaction guarantee. If the patient won’t eat it, the client can return it for a full refund. Use medical callbacks to follow up on diet changes. Many clients fail to do a proper diet transition and the pet returns to its old food, despite the medical need to eat a therapeutic diet. Just as you perform callbacks for conditions requiring ongoing care, elevate the medical importance of therapeutic diets with callbacks.

Whenever a diet change is made, a staff member should call the client two to three days after she leaves with the first bag or cans of therapeutic diet to check on how the food transition is going and to make sure the pet is eating the new food. This phone call achieves goals of exceptional customer service as well as patient care.

A staff member would call the client two to three days after the diet change and say, “Hello, Mrs. Smith. This is Wendy with Your Veterinary Hospital. Dr. Your Name asked me to call to confirm that you’re making the transition from Ollie’s previous food to the new therapeutic diet, Purina Veterinary Diets NF, for kidney disease. When switching foods, you should be mixing the two foods, gradually increasing the proportion of NF over one week and reducing the amount of the previous food. Have you begun the transition to get Ollie on his new kidney diet? Is he eating it? Eating this diet is like medicine in a can and will help us better manage Ollie’s kidney disease. Research shows cats with kidney disease will live twice as long if they eat a therapeutic diet. I will give you a courtesy reminder to refill Ollie’s food, which should be in ____ weeks. Would you like me to contact you by e-mail or phone call?”

Use callbacks for weight-management coaching. When a client commits to a weight-management program, teams need to use a series of medical progress callbacks to show their commitment as well. Create the expectation in the exam room, explaining that staff will be calling the client to follow through on progress.

“Your dog weighs **XX** pounds today. This extra weight could lead to serious and expensive health consequences such as heart disease, arthritis and diabetes. Even losing 10% of his weight will have immediate health benefits. We’ll create a plan today for your dog to lose X pounds. We’ll use a combination of Purina Veterinary Diets OM, healthy treats and walks. Once a month, we’ll call to remind you to stop by with your dog for a weight check. It takes just a few seconds to get your dog’s weight, and we will record it in your pet’s medical record. You’ll be amazed at the changes in your dog’s health and attitude!”

Send e-mail reminders for therapeutic diet refills. Just as you send patients on NSAIDS reminders for drug monitoring tests, treat therapeutic diets as medicine and send refill reminders for food. Ask your

distributor and pet food company representatives to help you calculate how long bags and cases will last. For example, a 32-pound bag of Purina Veterinary Diets OM will feed a 40-pound dog for 30 days. When the diet is first prescribed, enter the refill reminder in your practice-management software. E-mail a refill reminder at day 20, when the client will need to pick up food within 10 days.

Send e-mail reminders through Vetstreet or your practice-management software. Here's a sample message: "Please call 555-555-5555 to refill your therapeutic diet for joint management, or click here to order online and get home delivery." Midwest Veterinary Supply can help you set up an online store.

When you approach therapeutic diets as part of your treatment plan for managing diseases, you'll help patients live longer, increase the frequency of veterinary visits, and protect your practice health. Treat diets as medicine, not pet food.

Reference:

¹ Plantinga EA, Everts H., et al. "Retrospective Study of the Survival of Cats With Acquired Chronic Renal Insufficiency Offered Different Commercial Diets." *Veterinary Record* 157;185-187:2005.



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