

Here is what you do to force-feed a sick, adult cat: Talk to your vet first. For kittens, your vet may have special foods and special instructions other than the information here, which is for adult cats only.

You cut off the tip of a regular plastic syringe, and you make the hole twice as big or three times as big with a barbecue skewer or whatever. Twist the skewer around in the hole; trim with a knife. You buy about six or eight of the syringes and do the same to each one. The syringes will eventually be destroyed by your kitty's chomping on them with his or her teeth. Throw the chomped-up syringes away before the plastic bits from the holes can get into kitty's food, though.

For water and milk, keep a couple of syringes intact. Put olive oil on the pusher part of the syringe if it does not push easily, or else food will squirt all over you and the rest of the house.

Start feedings of the wet cat food with about 15 cc at first. Increase gradually to 20 cc or more as the kitty tolerates it. You will have to mash the food with some water until it is a bit looser than a toothpaste consistency. I use a spoon first and then beat the mixture with a couple of forks. If you heat the food in the microwave, always check the temperature first, as a mother would do with a baby's bottle. You don't want to scald your kitty's throat. Don't even try tuna. It is impossible to squirt through a syringe in any form. Room temperature for the food is best.

Try to do the same routine exactly the same each time you feed the cat. Do things in the same order, each time. Say "food," when you give food. Say "milk" or "water" when you give milk or water. Say "pill" when you give a pill. Say "sit" if the cat gets wiggly. Praise and pet the cat when it behaves correctly.

For the first few feedings, put the cat into a pillowcase and have a partner hold the cat on his or her lap until the cat trusts you enough for you to do the feeding alone. Wrap the pillowcase a bit around the neck of the cat but not so tightly that the cat cannot swallow. Watch your fingers. Squirt the food from the syringe into the side of the cat's mouth, and keep its head tilted slightly.

You **DO NOT WANT TO CHOKE THE CAT!** This can be easily done. Try to push pills especially to the side of the tongue and down the throat that way, with the cat's head tilted slightly up. Do the same with water and food: Put food or pills, solid or liquid or semi-liquid, in the side of the mouth. Praise the cat verbally each time it does well with the swallowing things. If pills are large or if a liquid medication is bitter, I squirt a little evaporated milk into the cat's mouth first to moisten its mouth up—about 1 cc or so.

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Give the cat time to swallow each bite or squirt of liquid. What I do is to push a little food or liquid, say 1 to 2 cc or so, in with the syringe and count, “one, two, three, four, quickly,” and then I push a bit more in and count again. If you do this consistently, the cat will lose a lot of its fear in eating this way and will start to swallow in time with your counting! Makes life easier on everyone!

Cover the area where you are feeding the cat, usually a chair, with newspapers. Put newspapers on the floor. If the cat is skittish at first, you may have to use cloth towels instead, pay the increased water bill, and gradually accustom it to the newspapers alone. Wear an old tee shirt or apron or something you don't mind having cat food spattered on when you feed the cat. Make or buy little bibs for kitty. I made mine out of scraps of fleece. These work very well, to keep the cat's throat and chest area cleaner.

Keep a clean, wet cloth with no soap on it handy to wipe kitty's mouth and chin and bits of food out of his/her fur elsewhere when you're done. Our Emily fussed over the wiping part, and so I was not too particular about how clean she got. What I didn't get cleaned up, she licked up or the other cats did. She was not infectious, or I would have kept her isolated in a room apart from the other cats and not allowed them to eat any of her leftover food. Likely, when kitty is well again, you will have to clean your walls, furniture, and carpet anyway. For temporary cleanup on carpets especially, non-scented baby wipes are the best with a little hydrogen peroxide—as long as the peroxide doesn't stain your carpet.

The main thing for you to remember, as you feed the cat, is to focus on getting food into the cat. Don't worry about the mess. Don't think about the pathetic yowling and growling and struggling of the cat. You will have to force the cat's jaws open at first, until it becomes more used to the routine. I squeeze gently on the jaw hinge part of the cat's mouth, on both sides with one hand, while I gently pull the cat's lower jaw down in the front of its mouth.

If the cat spits the food or pills out, try, try, again. If the cat throws everything up, try, try again. Just focus on getting the right amount of food eventually down kitty's throat and into its stomach at regular intervals. Don't feed pills with the food, at first. Do the pills separately in between meals. You will be spending considerable time at this. Be patient. Make sure you have more than enough food to start with. Just keep trying.

If you get scratched or bitten, clean the wound well with running water and antiseptic soap. Then I soak it in hydrogen peroxide for a few minutes. I do this when I get punched with needles or scissors when I sew, and it will protect you well against infection. Keep the wound open, and keep re-soaking it in hydrogen peroxide.

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If there is any sign of redness or swelling or streaking or unusual pain with any cat bite, go to your emergency room immediately. Cats' mouths carry lots of germs.

Keep a litter box clean and handy close by kitty, and the chances of her using it properly will greatly increase.

And now: Here are pictures of our Emily, showing her as she cooperates with her forced feeding by syringe.

I am doing this alone. I am barely holding her head, just enough to guide her. She is eagerly sucking and chomping and swallowing the food on her own.



You can't see her tail while she is doing this, but it is thumping a mile a minute as well, and her eyes are rolling, and her ears are twitching, and if I didn't know better, I'd almost say she's enjoying the show....



Text: Written by Rinda M. Byers Photos: Douglas E. Nash

Please make certain, again, that you talk to your vet first before using this information with your own cat. Thank you.

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