



Hypo-Allergenic Protein Diets

Courtesy of North Carolina State University, College of Veterinary Medicine

What are hydrolyzed protein diets?

Sometimes, the body's immune system recognizes components of the diet as "foreign" and reacts to them. The protein component is the most likely cause for **adverse food reactions (AFRs)** in dog and cat diets. Two ways of diagnosing and addressing AFRs are by feeding either a hydrolyzed protein diet or a novel protein diet as part of a diet trial. In hydrolyzed protein diets, the protein source (e.g., chicken, fish, soy) has been broken down into very small pieces—similar to how the body normally digests food. This makes it more difficult for the body to detect this potentially allergenic component and react to it. A **novel protein** is one that the body has never been exposed to before (e.g., rabbit, kangaroo, alligator) and therefore is less likely to be recognized by the immune system and cause an adverse reaction.

ELIMINATION DIET TRIALS

Elimination diet trials are the most reliable way to accurately diagnose a food allergy (adverse food reaction) or food intolerance in dogs and cats.

The recommended hydrolyzed or novel protein diet is fed exclusively for 6–10 weeks, followed by a dietary re-challenge. This helps identify ingredients that your pet is sensitive to and confirms that this is truly a dietary adverse reaction as opposed to environmental allergies, which can cause similar symptoms.

Is a hydrolyzed protein diet better than an over-the-counter novel ingredient diet?

One of the main differences between veterinary prescription hypoallergenic diet and **over-the-counter (OTC)** diets is the way they are manufactured. Prescription hydrolyzed diets and novel protein are made under far stricter quality control, while OTC diets can contain contaminant proteins that may skew the results of an elimination diet trial. Several different hydrolyzed diet options are available, and your veterinarian will help make the best choice for your pet.

Prescription novel ingredient diets can be good options for a diet trial, but they require an exacting understanding of what your pet has previously eaten. Any previous exposure to the diet component suspected to be responsible for your pet's signs—no matter how small—can set them up for a future reaction. And even though a protein source may be novel to your pet, cross-reactions between similar proteins can occur. Choosing a hydrolyzed protein diet can take the guesswork out of your pet's diet history. This approach can save frustration, time, and money in the long run—and get the needed information the first time around.

My pet loves treats! What options do I have?

The companies that make prescription hydrolyzed diets also make compatible treats! Another option is reserving a portion of your pet's normal meal to use pieces of kibble as individual treats. If you need a softer or "wetter" food, your pet's hydrolyzed diet may come in a canned version or you can add water to the kibble and then blend it. Alternatively, you can make homemade treats by simply baking the canned hydrolyzed diet.



Can I just have a skin or blood allergy test performed on my pet?

Unfortunately, skin and blood tests don't accurately identify food allergens. They are often provided on blood allergy test results, but there is unreliable correlation with clinical reactivity.

Is a grain-free diet the same as a hypoallergenic or hydrolyzed diet?

Generally, no. Over-the-counter diets advertised as "grain-free" are not typically limited-ingredient and may contain multiple protein and carbohydrate sources or contaminant nutritional components. While diets that are chosen for an elimination diet trial may be grain-free, they are specifically formulated and verified to have only the desired ingredients we want for the diet trial. The terms are not interchangeable.




Will my pet need to eat a prescription hydrolyzed diet forever?

It's possible. A hydrolyzed diet is necessary for the diet trial period (6–10 weeks) and then the animal can be re-challenged with a single protein source. A negative response (e.g., increased itching) can take up to 2 weeks to develop and indicates a positive food allergy. It is important to only re-introduce a single protein source at a time when rechallenging to accurately identify which protein is causing the reaction. It can take some time and experimenting to identify a true food allergy. Your pet's veterinarian will work with you to establish a proper diet for your pet.

What about a home-prepared diet?

While home-prepared diets can be options, these recipes and products (especially those without the guidance of a veterinary nutritionist) can carry far greater risks: for example, nutritional deficiencies, cross-contamination, bacteria, parasites, and physical hazards like bone fragments. Fortunately, there are two homemade diet companies with board-certified veterinary nutritionists—we feel comfortable recommending their recipes and products. If you'd like to pursue homemade diets further, these sites also provide great resources as a starting point. Please find the links below.

THREE TAKEAWAYS

-  Elimination diet trials are the most accurate and reliable method to diagnose adverse food reactions in pets.
-  Due to their strict quality control and small protein size, prescription veterinary hydrolyzed diets are preferred for elimination diet trials.
-  Starting with a prescription hydrolyzed diet for a diet trial may save time and money overall.

Links:

- ☆ Balance IT: <https://secure.balanceit.com/index.php>
- ☆ JustFoodForDogs: <https://www.justfoodfordogs.com/>