



The Pet Naturopath
ANIMAL NUTRITION

5 Signs Your Dog or Cat May Have a Nutritional Deficiency

What to look for, why it happens, and what to do next.

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Is your pet getting everything they need?

After more than 20 years as a veterinary nurse, I have seen how often nutritional gaps are behind the symptoms we write off as 'just getting older' or 'one of those things': a dull coat, low energy, recurring gut problems. This guide covers the five signs I see most often, and what you can do about them.

This guide is educational only and does not replace veterinary care. If your pet is unwell, see your vet first.

Sign	What You Might Notice
1	Dull coat, flaky skin, excessive shedding
2	Lethargy and unexplained low energy
3	Chronic or recurring digestive upset
4	Frequent illness and slow wound healing
5	Behavioural changes and increased anxiety



SIGN 1

Dull Coat, Flaky Skin and Excessive Shedding

The skin and coat are often the first places nutritional gaps appear. When the diet falls short, the body prioritises vital organs, and the skin is often where we start to see the signs.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Dull, dry coat with no shine
- Persistent dandruff or flaking, especially along the back
- Excessive shedding beyond normal moults
- Recurrent itching or hotspots that keep coming back
- In cats: greasy or unkempt coat, or stopped self-grooming

NUTRIENTS OFTEN INVOLVED

Omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, especially EPA and DHA from marine sources, are the most common culprit. Zinc, biotin, vitamin A, and adequate dietary protein all play important roles in healthy skin and coat.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

- Check whether the diet contains good omega-3 sources, as many processed foods do not
- A good-quality fish oil (sardine, anchovy or krill) is often a simple first step
- Rule out thyroid issues, parasites, or skin conditions with your vet first

I see this constantly, and it is rarely just one nutrient. Often it is the overall pattern of the diet that needs addressing, not just adding a supplement on top.





SIGN 2

Lethargy and Unexplained Low Energy

The occasional quiet day is normal. But weeks of low energy, reluctance to exercise, or a flat 'just not themselves' feeling is worth investigating.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Sleeping more than usual or refusing walks
- Loss of interest in play or favourite activities
- Slower recovery after exercise
- In dogs: lagging behind, sitting down mid-walk
- In cats: stopped jumping to favourite spots

NUTRIENTS OFTEN INVOLVED

B vitamins (B12, B1, folate) are essential for cellular energy production. Iron supports oxygen transport, and even mild anaemia causes real fatigue. Magnesium and CoQ10 are critical for mitochondrial energy and both decline with age and in processed-food diets.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

- Ask your vet for a full blood count to check iron, B12, and thyroid levels
- Assess protein quality and quantity, especially important for seniors
- Consider whether any long-term medications may be depleting key nutrients

B12 deficiency is commonly missed because it does not always show up dramatically on standard bloods until quite advanced. It is one of the first things I look at.





SIGN 3

Chronic or Recurring Digestive Upset

Occasional loose stools happen. But recurring gas, unpredictable appetite, soft stools, or frequent vomiting are your pet's gut trying to tell you something.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Recurring soft stools or diarrhoea not explained by infection or parasites
- Chronic gas or bloating
- Fluctuating appetite: hungry one day, off food the next
- Weight loss despite eating well
- Undigested food visible in the stool

NUTRIENTS OFTEN INVOLVED

Digestive enzymes, naturally present in raw whole foods, are often destroyed in processing, leaving the pancreas overworked. Prebiotic fibre, probiotic bacteria, zinc, vitamin A, and glutamine all support gut lining integrity and a healthy microbiome.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

- Keep a food and stool diary for two weeks, as patterns usually become clear
- Have your vet screen for parasites, IBD, pancreatitis, and food sensitivities
- Ask about a species-appropriate probiotic or digestive enzyme supplement

The gut microbiome is directly shaped by what goes in. I regularly see real improvements when even small amounts of fresh whole food are added to the diet.





SIGN 4

Frequent Illness and Slow Wound Healing

A well-nourished immune system is a strong one. When your pet picks up every illness going around, or small wounds take ages to heal, nutrition is always worth examining.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Recurring ear infections or skin infections that keep returning
- Respiratory infections in cats that come back regularly
- Wounds, hotspots, or surgical sites that heal slowly
- Recurrent urinary tract infections
- A general decline in resilience, especially in older pets

NUTRIENTS OFTEN INVOLVED

Zinc is critical for immune cell function, antibody production, and wound repair, and it is frequently low in grain-heavy commercial diets. Selenium, vitamin E, vitamin D, and high-quality protein all play essential roles in immune strength.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

- Work with your vet to rule out underlying conditions such as allergies, diabetes, or hormonal issues
- Assess dietary zinc, as absorption is impaired by phytates in grain-based diets
- Ensure protein intake is sufficient, as it increases significantly during illness or recovery

Zinc deficiency is one I find in almost every consultation involving recurrent infections. It is easy to miss because many diets technically meet minimums, but bioavailability is a whole other story.





SIGN 5

Behavioural Changes and Increased Anxiety

What your pet eats directly affects how their brain works. Anxiety, restlessness, or gradual personality changes can all have nutritional roots.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Increased anxiety or clingy behaviour with no obvious trigger
- Irritability or low-level aggression that has developed gradually
- Compulsive behaviours such as licking, pacing, or tail chasing
- In seniors: disorientation or confusion (cognitive decline)
- Noise phobias worsening over time

NUTRIENTS OFTEN INVOLVED

Omega-3 DHA is a structural component of brain cell membranes, essential for neurotransmitter function. Magnesium regulates the stress response. B6 and B12 are required for serotonin and dopamine production. Tryptophan, from dietary protein, is serotonin's direct precursor.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

- Rule out pain first, as chronic discomfort often shows as behaviour change before physical signs appear
- Check omega-3 intake, as a high omega-6 diet promotes inflammation that affects mood
- For seniors, ask about phosphatidylserine or MCT oil for cognitive support

Behaviour is communication. Diet is not always the whole answer, but it is always part of the picture, and one of the most actionable things you can change.





Ready to get your pet thriving?

A personalised nutritional consultation looks at your pet's full picture: species, breed, age, health history, and diet, to give you a clear, practical plan.

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Jessica Rice | Veterinary Nurse | Online Consultations

Educational purposes only. Always consult your veterinarian for diagnosis and treatment.