



Feline Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is a condition characterized by an overactive thyroid gland. The thyroid gland is located at the front of your cat's neck, below the larynx. The thyroid produces regulatory hormones that affect metabolism and energy. Hyperthyroidism is typically caused by a growth; most often the growth is benign, but it is possible for hyperthyroidism to be caused by tumors. Regardless of the cause, hyperthyroidism is treatable. If hyperthyroidism is left untreated, it can cause complications like hypertension or heart failure.

Causes

The cause of hyperthyroidism is unknown. The condition likely results from a multitude of factors, including dietary, genetic and environmental conditions. Oftentimes a benign growth will cause the thyroid gland to over-produce T4. These growths are usually not cancerous! Less than five percent of cats exhibit malignant tumors as causes of hyperthyroidism.

Some breeds of cats are less likely than others to develop hyperthyroidism. The Siamese and Himalayan breeds tend to be less likely to be affected by hyperthyroidism than other breeds. The variance of risk between breeds suggests a genetic component to hyperthyroidism.

Signs and Symptoms

The most common signs of hyperthyroidism include weight loss, increased appetite, increased energy, restlessness, and increased drinking and urination. Some cats may suffer from diarrhea, vomiting, or a poor hair coat. Others may show generalized weakness, urination in unusual areas, or voice changes. Heart disease typically results when the condition is allowed to advance untreated; this is indicated by labored breathing. Less commonly, some cats show decreased appetites and are overweight.

If your cat is hyperthyroid, it most likely has at least one enlarged lobe of its thyroid gland. Our veterinarian may be able to detect any enlarged lobes during a physical exam. A cat without hyperthyroidism will have normal sized lobes that cannot be detected by touch.

Diagnosis

Hyperthyroidism is fairly common in middle-aged and elderly cats, and most are diagnosed between the ages of 10 and 13 years.

Blood levels of thyroid hormones (T4, and sometimes free T4 or T3) are measured to diagnose hyperthyroidism. A blood panel will also show any changes in liver, kidney and blood vessel functions.

Sometimes thyroid function or imaging tests, an X-ray of the chest, or an ultrasound of the heart are also recommended to verify a diagnosis and test for co-existing conditions like

heart disease. Many cats have high blood pressure at the time of diagnosis, so it is common to measure blood pressure as well. A urine sample should also be collected.

Hyperthyroidism can affect many organs, and blood and urine samples will help to evaluate liver and kidney health. Many older cats also have chronic kidney disease, and these tests will identify if this is a health concern for your cat. An X-ray or ultrasound will show if hyperthyroidism has affected your cat's heart. A blood pressure check will show if there is increased blood flow to the kidneys. If this has occurred, it could hide age-related chronic changes. The kidneys should be continually monitored in order to detect any changes in function and treat accordingly.



For questions regarding treatment of feline hyperthyroidism, refer to the informational handout titled "Treatment of Feline Hyperthyroidism." If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact us!

Sources:

Brooks WC. Signs, symptoms and diagnosis of hyperthyroidism. VeterinaryPartner.com. <http://www.veterinarypartner.com/Content.plx?P=A&A=516>. Published January 1, 2011. Updated March 1, 2012. Accessed July 12, 2016.

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