



ALLEY CAT RESCUE

AN ALLIANCE FOR CAT PROTECTION

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Common Cat Health Concerns

Below are a few common health concerns that some cats may face at different stages of their life. Some of these issues present in cats with obvious symptoms, while others can easily go unnoticed for months presenting no signs of illness. Also, each cat is different in regards to pain tolerance and each issue may present differently depending on the individual cat. Therefore, it's important to schedule an annual checkup with your veterinarian, so these health concerns can be detected as early as possible.

Feline Obesity

According to a 2016 survey done by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, 58.9% of cats are now estimated to be clinically overweight. Of course, just like with people, every cat has a different ideal weight. To determine if your cat is overweight or obese, it is best to discuss the issue with your veterinarian. If it is determined that your cat is overweight, the vet can then give you an ideal weight range as well as diet advice.

Problem: Obesity can cause a wide range of health issues in cats including:

- Joint problems such as arthritis
- Heart disease
- Labored breathing
- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Hepatic lipidosis (severe form of liver failure)

Treatment: Veterinarians will often suggest a change in diet to help your cat lose weight. A diet change could include going from a "free-feeding" set-up (where food is always left out) to a scheduled feeding time. This allows the cat guardian to portion out the food and prevents overeating. Guardians can also switch to wet food which has more protein, less carbohydrates, and a higher water content. As with humans, you should always discuss a diet plan for your cat with a professional before changing her food.

Another treatment is to get your cat active and exercising. It is very important to make sure that your cat is getting plenty of playtime. Just putting toys out is often not enough; interactive play is crucial. One of the first things you can do is to figure out what *kinds* of toys get your cat ready and meowing to play! If your cat is excited about the toy, it is easier to get her to play. Read our tips on entertaining an indoor cat [here](#) to learn how you can get your cat active and shedding a few pounds.

It is important to remember that although fat cats may look cute and cuddly, they are at a greater risk of severe ailments. Managing your cat's weight should be taken seriously and should be done with the advice of a veterinary throughout the process.

Feline Diabetes

Problem: Feline diabetes is a common endocrine disorder in cats, affecting approximately 1 in 200 cats (Bloom & Rand, 2014), and is more likely to affect male cats. Similar to diabetes in humans, feline diabetes is a condition where the body cannot properly produce or respond to insulin resulting in an elevated level of the sugar glucose. Glucose cannot enter the cells so the level of glucose in the blood can become abnormally high, which is known as hyperglycemia. Diabetic cats can also suffer from the inverse, hypoglycemia, when their blood sugar gets very low. Hypoglycemia can be very serious, causing a cat to lose consciousness or even die.

Types:

- Cats with Type I feline diabetes have high glucose concentrations because of decreased insulin production.
- Cats with Type II diabetes have high glucose levels because their cells do not properly respond to insulin.
 - In most cases, cats suffer from Type II diabetes.

Symptoms:

- Dehydration that drives increased thirst
- Increased urination
- Obesity
- Weight loss despite an increased appetite
- Overconsumption of food

Treatments: Feline diabetes is diagnosed by testing the cat's blood and urine. The most common treatment for feline diabetes is insulin therapy, usually through injections. Caretakers can be taught how to give their cats the insulin shots themselves. Oral medication is a potential form of treatment but it can have negative side effects and is less effective than shots. Another common treatment is a diet with low carbohydrates, which can improve a cat's control of blood glucose levels.

Feline diabetes is rarely cured so for many caretakers, the goal is diabetic remission. This is when a cat "maintains a normal glucose level for more than four weeks without insulin injections or oral glucose regulating medications" (Buzhardt, 2017). Once a cat is in remission she is likely to stay there if she maintains a good body condition score and eat a low carbohydrate diet. Cats with well-controlled diabetes can live many years of high quality life.

Feline Hyperthyroidism

Problem: Hyperthyroidism is a common glandular condition in older cats and occurs when there's an excess of thyroxine-a (a thyroid hormone, also referred to as T4) in the bloodstream. Cats with feline hyperthyroidism are also at risk for heart disease, kidney disease, and hypertension.

Symptoms:

- Weight loss despite an increased appetite
- Overconsumption of food
- Increased thirst
- Increased urination
- Vomiting

- Diarrhea
- Changes in activity level
- Increased shedding
- Unkempt appearance

Treatment: Your veterinarian can diagnose hyperthyroidism with a simple blood test to check your cat's T4 levels and prescribe a treatment that is best for your cat. Possible treatments include oral medication, radioactive iodine therapy, and surgery. There is no cure for feline hyperthyroidism, however, this disease can usually be managed fairly well with appropriate education and treatment provided by caretakers.

Feline Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Problem: Feline inflammatory bowel disease is actually a group of gastrointestinal diseases where inflammatory cells are spread into the cat's gastrointestinal tract. IBD can be caused by a parasitic or bacterial infection or a food allergy, but in most cases, the cause can be unknown.

Symptoms:

- Chronic vomiting
- Weight loss
- Fatigue
- Diarrhea
- Lethargy
- Change in appetite

Treatment: A diagnosis of IBD usually involves ruling out other causes of gastrointestinal inflammation. A confirmation of IBD can be achieved through a microscopic evaluation of tissue collected through an intestinal or gastric biopsy. Treatment of IBD involves managing the symptoms of the disease because IBD itself cannot be cured. These treatments are usually in the form of a diet change such as a hypoallergenic diet, high fiber diet, and low fat diet. In some cases, administering corticosteroids is necessary to control inflammation.

Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease

Problem: Feline lower urinary tract disease is the term used for a variety of conditions that affect a cat's bladder and urethra. Feline lower urinary tract disease is most commonly seen in middle-aged, overweight, indoor cats. The disease has various causes including bladder stones, infection, and urethral obstruction.

Symptoms:

- Difficulty and pain urinating
- Frequent urination
- Blood in urine
- Urination outside of the litter box
- Excessive licking
- Loss of appetite

Treatment: Diagnosis of feline lower urinary tract disease can be difficult because this disease has many potential causes. A urinalysis can be used to assess the urine, so proper treatment can be administered based on the cause(s) of the disease. For example, feline lower urinary tract disease caused by a urethral obstruction will require surgery to move the blockage. Please note that a urinary blockage in male cats can be very

dangerous, even resulting in death. If you think your male cat has a urinary blockage, the cat should be evaluated by a vet immediately. However, in most chronic cases, a change in diet can be very helpful in managing lower urinary tract issues; your vet can prescribe a special food. It's also important to increase your cat's water intake by feeding her canned foods and by adding water to her meals.

Hair Balls

Problem: Hair balls are a condition where a cat throws up hair accumulated in the stomach and gastrointestinal tract. Hair balls can become dangerous in severe cases where they block the passage of food.

Symptoms:

- Hacking and vomiting
- Decreased appetite
- Upset stomach

Treatment: The best treatment is to prevent hair balls by regularly grooming your cat, especially if your cat has long hair. Petroleum based hair ball lubricants can help a cat pass the hair ball, and cat food high in fiber can help encourage healthy digestion. In extreme cases, surgery might be needed to remove the hair ball from the cat's stomach.

Heart Murmurs

Problem: Feline heart murmurs are a condition that occurs when the heart produces extra vibrations in response to a disturbance in the blood flow. Heart murmurs can resolve themselves over time or remain but have little effect on the cat's quality of life. Cat parents should be careful though, because heart murmurs could be a sign of more severe heart conditions. Murmurs are graded by their level of intensity, from a I to a VI.

Symptoms:

- Coughing
- Weakness
- Lethargy

Treatment: Heart murmurs are diagnosed by examining the cat's heart with a stethoscope. Treatment for heart murmurs vary depending on the cause of the condition. Hyperthyroidism is a common cause for heart murmurs, therefore many cats are treated for hyperthyroidism to help with the heart murmurs.

Ringworm

Problem: Ringworm is the most common fungal infection in cats. Ringworm in cats can spread to other pets and humans so early detection and treatment is crucial. The fungus has a two week incubation period between exposure and the presence of symptoms but the fungus is transmissible before symptoms even occur. Severe cases of ringworm are more common in kittens and adult cats with poor immune systems. Ringworm does not involve any worms infecting the cat, rather it is named ringworm because of the circular rashes that can appear on the skin.

Symptoms:

- Flaky, circular bald spots surrounded by red rings (usually around the head, ears, forelimbs, whiskers, toes, tail)
- Broken and stubbly hair

- Alterations in hair or skin color
- Skin inflammation
- Excessive grooming
- Dandruff
- Infection of claws
- Dermatitis

Treatment: Ringworm can be diagnosed by examining the cat's skin and coat with a Wood's lamp (blacklight). This method may not always be effective, therefore examining a skin culture in a laboratory is the preferred method of diagnosis. Treatments should be used for at least 6 weeks to ensure that the fungus is truly gone. Topical medication is often used to treat the condition. This can be used in conjunction with other treatments such as oral medication and medicated shampoo baths.

- Itraconazole is the preferred medication for treatment of ringworm. It's only known potential adverse reaction is anorexia.
- Terbinafine is a pill given orally twice a day for 2 weeks. The pill can stay effective for 5 weeks after treatment has ended. **Oral medication only kills the fungus internally.**
- Lime Sulphur dip. This is an effective, safe and inexpensive treatment that can be done at home. The dips should be given once a week until the cat's skin culture comes back negative for ringworm and the dip should be used for all animals in the home. It is important to allow the dip to air dry on the cat's fur.
- Topical medications are less effective in cats than humans because the medication has difficulty seeping through the fur and there is a possibility of hidden lesions. The hairs around the lesions should be clipped away to make the topical medication more effective. **Topical medication only treats the hair follicles and does not cure the fungus.**
- Medicated shampoo baths are recommended for all cats living in the home.
- Decrease stress. Stress can lower the immune system and lead to further spread of the fungus.

Allowing your cat to "self-resolve" is not recommended, as this process can take up to a year and the cat could lose a large amount of fur making her vulnerable to other infections; again ringworm is highly contagious and can be contracted by humans. When a caretaker has a case of ringworm in the home, it is very important to clean the home effectively. Microscopic fungal spores can be shed from the infected cat into the environment and can stay in the environment for months.

Tips for shelters:

- Put infected cats in isolation to prevent further spread of ringworm. Provide the cat with enrichment so stress levels stay low.
- Note which cats came into the shelter together. The ringworm infection likely could have affected multiple cage mates.
- Use a lime Sulphur dip once you suspect a fungal infection. Use the dip 2-4 times before allowing the cat to go to foster care.
- Clean the healthiest cats first.
- Wear separate clothing when handling cats with ringworm to prevent spread to non-infected cats.
- Make sure foster homes with infected cats are following the same cleaning procedures.

Upper respiratory infection

Problem: Upper Respiratory Infections (URIs) are infections of a cat's nose, throat, and sinus area caused by viruses and bacteria. URIs caused by viruses are contagious between cats and therefore should be detected and treated quickly. In multiple cat households, shelters, and boarding facilities, it is vital to quarantine a cat suffering from a URI as to not infect other cats. Exposure to the infection can either result from direct contact between cats or from exposure to litter boxes, toys, and bedding.

Feline calicivirus and feline herpesvirus account for around 90% of all cases of URI in cats. If a cat has feline herpesvirus, she will be a carrier for life, meaning she will always have the virus. While the virus lies dormant (no symptoms present), transmission of the virus is rare. Again, when symptoms are present, that's when transmission is of high concern. For cats with the herpesvirus, stress can trigger the URI so make sure to monitor the cat closely. Other causes of URIs include fungus, *Chlamydophila felis*, *Mycoplasma*, and *Bordetella bronchiseptica*.

Symptoms:

- Conjunctivitis
- Eye discharge
- Fever
- Sneezing
- Runny nose
- Congestion
- Cough
- Rapid breathing
- Drooling
- Ulcers in the nose and mouth
- Loss of appetite due to decreased sense of smell

Treatment: Diagnosis of a URI is done by an analysis of the cat's clinical symptoms. If the cat has severe or chronic symptoms, the vet may order x-rays of the chest and/or skull, along with blood tests. Treatment is usually aimed at managing the symptoms. Antibiotics may be used to fight a bacterial infection, which are prescribed for 7-10 days. Eye and nasal ointments may also be used. Cleaning the cat's eyes and nose, along with using a humidifier can help speed up recovery. In extreme cases, hospitalization may be needed to provide a cat with intravenous fluids. URIs will usually clear up in 7-10 days but cats with persistent URIs can be given antiviral medication. Again, because URIs are highly contagious, all items the infected cat has come in contact with should be thoroughly cleaned or thrown out.

Resources

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