

Hampden Veterinary Clinic
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Feline Hyperthyroidism

Feline hyperthyroidism is one of the most common hormonal problems in veterinary medicine. It is often seen in middle aged to older cats and can cause significant physical and behavioral changes.

Feline hyperthyroidism is a disease where the thyroid glands become overactive and larger. In cats it is commonly a non cancerous enlargement of the glands and the cause is still unknown. Nutritional factors, environmental toxins and immune changes have all been proposed as possible triggers for hyperthyroid disease.

Cats with hyperthyroidism will have slow progressive weight loss, increased drinking, urination, a ravenous appetite, restlessness, abnormal vocalization, and unkept hair coat. If left untreated hyperthyroidism can lead to kidney damage, high blood pressure, heart disease (hypertrophic cardiomyopathy), retinal damage and blindness. In some cats and increased incidence of vomiting and diarrhea are also noted.

On examinations patients with this disease can be thin, have a palpable enlarged thyroid, and an abnormal heart sound (gallop rhythm).

Diagnosis is made by measuring the level for serum T4 concentrations. This is a speedy blood test that can be performed in our office.

There are 4 methods of treatment available to cats with hyperthyroidism: medical, surgical, radioactive and prescription diet. We typically recommend medical or radioactive therapy for cats with this disease.

Medical therapy consists of giving an oral medication called methimazole. It is inexpensive and requires no special skills to administer, it requires no hospitalization, and has very little risk to the patient. However it is a life long daily medication and can cause vomiting or decreased appetite in some patients and it is not a cure. This drug typically helps improve the clinical signs in about 1 to 3 weeks. It is required twice a day and annual blood work to monitor the serum T4 levels is required. In some cats, oral medications are NOT an option and methimazole can be compounded into an ointment to be placed on the ear or groin. The medication is then absorbed into the body through the skin. Although a safe and effective treatment option, your pet will require more veterinary office visits and blood work over their life span. Some owners also report damage to the owner-pet relationship if their pet resents the daily medication.

Surgery can be performed to remove the enlarged, abnormal thyroid tissue. This method of treatment is expensive, requires pre-surgical medical therapy, hospitalization, and has many potential side effects. Most patients are poor anesthetic candidates at the time of diagnosis. They are typically treated with oral methimazole for several weeks prior to surgery. A special scan is typically done prior to surgery to make sure there are no metastatic tissues or active thyroid secreting tissue in the chest. If the scan is positive this will make surgery unsuccessful. Post surgical complications can include hypothyroidism or low thyroid, damage to the parathyroid glands or paralysis of the larynx predisposing them to pneumonia. Furthermore about 80% of cases will develop hyperthyroidism in the remaining thyroid gland and will require a second surgery within 2 years. We typically do not recommend this option.

Radioisotope treatment is safe, effective, and is a cure to hyperthyroidism. In this treatment radioactive iodine is injected into the patient. Abnormal hyper functional thyroid tissue will absorb it and be destroyed. It is more cost effective than surgery and in younger patients may be less expensive than life long medication and repeat blood work. There is no damage to other organs and preserves healthy thyroid tissue and does not affect the parathyroid glands. Most patients return to normal within 1 month of therapy. However it can be expensive requires hospitalization and requires travel to Portland Maine.

Y/D is a new prescription diet made by Hill's Science diet that has been clinically proven to restore thyroid health in 3 weeks. It must be the only food source. It will NOT be effective if any other non-prescription treats or foods care given. Some patients may still require oral medications to help control the disease.

Prognosis

Prognosis will depend on whether your cat's heart, kidneys and eyes were affected before treatment and whether there is a cancerous tumor that is affected the thyroid. Patients with severe heart and kidney disease or cancer may not do well even with good management of the disease. The majority of patients do very well with treatment and have a good quality of life. Left untreated this disease will lead to a poor quality of life and ultimately cause terminal complications.