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Feline Hyperthyroidism

What is Hyperthyroidism?

Hyperthyroidism is a common disease of older cats. The thyroid gland is located in the neck and plays a very important role in regulating the body's rate of metabolism. Hyperthyroidism is a disorder characterized by the overproduction of thyroid hormones and a subsequent increase in the metabolic rate. This internal stress can cause damage to a variety of body systems and organs such as the kidneys and heart. Without treatment, these systems become overactive or damaged and can begin to fail.

The symptoms for this disease are variable with the most common client concerns being weight loss, increased activity, increased vocalization, crankiness, increased food and water consumption, and vomiting. On examination your vet may feel enlargement of the thyroid gland.

What causes Hyperthyroidism?

While some risk factors have been identified, a specific cause has not been determined as yet. The possible role of dietary iodine continues to be investigated as an influence on the development of Hyperthyroidism.

How is it diagnosed?

The first step is to determine the blood level of one of the thyroid hormones, called Thyroxine or T4. Usually, the T4 level is so high that there is no question as to the diagnosis. Occasionally, a cat suspected of having Hyperthyroidism will have T4 levels within the upper range of normal cats. When this occurs, a second test, such as a thyroid scan or a T3 Suppression Test, is performed.

What are my options for treatment?

Treatment of hyperthyroid disease is usually very successful as less than two percent of hyperthyroid cats actually have cancerous growths of the thyroid gland.

Many factors must come into consideration when choosing the best therapy for an individual cat, and when possible, tests are done before adopting any form of treatment. These tests are needed to evaluate the overall health of the cat and predict the chances for complications. Blood tests, urine tests, blood pressure measurement, ultrasound and xrays are often used to detect any underlying disease which may impact treatment choice.

Traditional methods of managing the disease include medication, surgery and radioactive iodine therapy.

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Recently, there has been success in the dietary treatment of some hyperthyroid cats.

1. Radioactive iodine:

   The most effective way to treat feline Hyperthyroidism is with radioactive iodine therapy.

   It is given by injection and destroys all abnormal thyroid tissue without endangering other organs. Recurrence of the disease is uncommon after radioactive iodine therapy. Your cat will need to stay there for several days until the radioactive material clears from their body.

2. Medication:

   Administration of drugs to prevent the production of excess thyroid hormones.
   To be truly effective, the drug must be given for the remainder of the cat's life. Periodic blood tests must also be done to keep the dosage regulated. This type of treatment is appropriate for the cat who has other health problems or is exceptionally old. Recurrence of the disease is a possibility in some cats, and dosage changes are often required. Some of these medications come in tablet form and some come as a topical preparation (Methimazole).

3. Dietary treatment:

   Research has found that feeding a low-iodine food decreases thyroid hormone concentrations and alleviates clinical signs of feline Hyperthyroidism.
   A special prescription diet called Hills Feline Y/D may help some patients. This diet is not appropriate for all patients and additional sources of iodine (treats, water sources, supplements) prevent it working.

4. Surgery:

   Surgical thyroidectomy is the removal of the thyroid glands. Only the affected gland is removed. There is a possibility the other thyroid gland develops a tumour 1-2 years later.

What is the prognosis?

Hyperthyroidism is a potentially debilitating condition when left untreated, but this disease can usually be managed, or even cured, with treatment.

Depending on the treatment option we recommend 6 monthly check ups and a blood test.