



Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is a relatively common disease in older cats (it is rare in dogs). It is the overproduction of thyroid hormone due to a benign tumor-like growth on the thyroid gland.

The thyroid gland is located under the neck and is responsible for many things including metabolism. The disease affects many organs. If left untreated, it will only worsen and it can be life threatening.

Signs

Common signs include:

- weight loss
- eating more
- overly active
- poor hair coat
- drinking/urinating more
- vomiting/diarrhea
- fast heart rate
- aggressiveness
- crying at night
- weak or depressed

The classic cat with an overactive thyroid is losing weight but still active and eating well. Many owners don't realize the cat is sick because they seem to act normal. Once the cat loses enough weight, it becomes obvious there is a problem. If the cat has other signs, it may also trigger a visit to the vet to check things out.



Some cats will develop heart disease with this condition. The heart muscle gets thicker and the heart gets bigger. You may notice a fast heart rate when you pick up your cat. All of this can lead to heart failure. Fortunately, when you treat the cat, the heart usually gets better.

Ironically, a higher thyroid level can help kidney problems. The extra thyroid hormones increase blood flow through the kidneys. This helps the kidneys to work better in a cat with kidney failure. In these cases, treatment keeps the thyroid level on the higher side of normal to help the kidneys.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is by measuring the thyroid hormone in the blood. Occasionally the test will be normal in a cat that has thyroid disease. This is more likely if the disease has just started. It can also happen if the cat has another illness that lowers the thyroid level. This makes it seem normal when it would actually be higher.

Most of the time, however, the diagnosis is easy. Additional tests will look for other problems that are masking the thyroid condition or are due to a high thyroid level.

It is important to have all cats tested once a year when they reach middle age. This helps you discover the problem early.

Treatment Options

There are several options for treating hyperthyroidism. Each has advantages and disadvantages.

Surgery

Surgery to remove the thyroid gland used to be an option. The drawback is that it doesn't always cure the cat. We don't recommend surgery anymore because of safer options that are now available.

Medical treatment

Methimazole is a daily medication that stops the gland from making hormone. It does not cure the condition but only keeps it under control. It must be given for the rest of the cat's



life. It is available as a tablet, a flavored liquid, or as a gel that you apply to the inside of the ears (transdermal).

Some cats will have side effects such as vomiting, itching, listlessness, and fever. In serious cases, it can affect the blood cells or internal organs. If vomiting is the only sign, switching to the gel instead of an oral medicine will often help. Otherwise, you may need to stop the medication.

After your cat has been on medicine for about a month, we test the thyroid levels to see if they are in a normal range. If not, we will adjust the dose of the medicine.

We will also do other blood tests and a urinalysis to see if there is any change in the organs, especially the kidneys, after starting the thyroid medication. If so, it may require an adjustment of the dosage.

Radioactive Iodine

An injection of radioactive iodine will irradiate and destroy the thyroid tumor. This will cure the cat and is safe. Most cats will not need any medication afterwards. In some cats, though this is not common, the thyroid hormone goes too low after treatment, necessitating medication.



The disadvantage to this option is the expense and the need for a special facility. The cat has to stay there for 4-7 days.

It is generally best to start the cat on methimazole before having radiation done. If there are underlying kidney problems that only show up after the cat is treated, radiation may not be a good choice.

Prescription Food

Hill's Prescription Diet y/d is an iodine-restricted food that prevents the formation of excess thyroid hormone. It does not cure the condition but controls it as long as the cat eats nothing else besides the prescription diet.



Some owners don't like that restriction and some cats won't eat it. If your cat is eating this food, we test the thyroid hormone level every six months.

Summary

Hyperthyroidism can be life threatening. Early diagnosis is best for your cat's health. Once treated, however, cats will usually have a good quality of life. They can continue to live for years.