

Hyperthyroidism in Cats

A Brief Guide • Part of the Educational Pet Disease Series from Lap of Love

Signs & Symptoms

Initial Symptoms

- Difficulty breathing
- Inability to play
- Seems uncomfortable
- Mild to severe weight loss
- Inappetence and nausea
- Vomiting and diarrhea

Intermediate Symptoms

- Difficulty rising and moving
- Blue gums and/or tongue
- Increased sleeping
- Paralysis/dragging legs
- Changes in voice
- Irritability

Advanced Symptoms

- Open mouth breathing
- Reclusive quiet behavior
- Panting/abdominal breathing
- Coughing
- Unthrifty coat

Crisis Situations Requiring Immediate Medical Intervention

- Difficulty breathing/panting
- Dragging back legs/unable to walk
- Blue gums and/or tongue
- Sudden collapse
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Yowling in pain

What Is It?

Hyperthyroidism is a common disease affecting mostly middle-aged and older cats. The condition is caused by the increased production of thyroid hormones by the thyroid glands located in the cat's neck near the vocal cord cartilage. Generally, the enlargement of the thyroid and subsequent increase in thyroid hormones is caused by a non-cancerous tumor called an adenoma. Very rarely, hyperthyroidism can occur due to an adenocarcinoma, which is a malignant form of cancer. The hormones of the thyroid glands affect many areas of the body therefore, hyperthyroidism can cause significant secondary illnesses. When considering the cardiovascular system, the excess of thyroid hormone can cause thickening of the heart wall resulting in cardiac compromise. Without intervention, heart function deteriorates and can lead to congestive heart failure and death. Hypertension (high blood pressure) is a common complication of hyperthyroidism that must often be managed with medication. Prolonged high blood pressure can result in serious damage to the eyes, kidneys, and heart. In contrast to cats, dogs very rarely develop true hyperthyroidism; if they do, it is almost always due to a cancerous thyroid tumor.

Diagnosis

Hyperthyroidism is diagnosed on bloodwork which may be performed as part of a cat's wellness check up or maybe required due to the cat showing certain clinical signs. Your veterinarian will feel for thyroid gland enlargement in the neck, check for an elevated heart rate and heart murmur, damage to the internal structures of the eyes, high blood pressure, and other common physical exam findings. Further confirmatory diagnostics include thyroid hormone panels and repeated basic bloodwork. In rare cases, cats with hyperthyroidism will have normal thyroid test results. However, if hyperthyroidism is still suspected, additional testing can confirm the diagnosis. As hyperthyroidism causes secondary diseases, monitoring bloodwork and frequent examinations are necessary. Most commonly heart and kidney disease are diagnosed secondary to hyperthyroidism. Typical symptoms include weight loss, increased appetite, increased thirst, inappropriate urination and/or defecation, irritability, unthrifty coat, vomiting, diarrhea, vision loss, and vocalization changes.

Treatment and Management

There are 4 basic options: medication, surgery, radioactive-iodine therapy and diet.

Medications cannot cure the disease, but they decrease the production of the thyroid hormone. The pills are typically inexpensive, small, and available in such forms as compounded, flavored liquids, and transdermal gels, if needed for cats who cannot be given oral medications. Periodic blood tests will evaluate the medication's effectiveness and check for side effects and secondary diseases. Some cats can experience vomiting, inappetence, and skin rashes, particularly around the face. This is a life-long therapy that may require dose adjustments while in use.



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Management Tips

Consider providing:

- Easily accessible food and water
- Ramps/stairs to common areas
- Access to "safe" quiet areas
- Warm, soft sleeping areas
- Creative stimulation that does not require strenuous activity
- Compounded medications in easy to deliver and/or tasty form
- Wet food to increase water intake
- Multiple litter boxes

Try to:

- Be consistent with medications
- Track appetite, bowel movements, breathing, vomiting or diarrhea episodes, weight, etc.
- Limit stress (kids, noise)
- Modifying slippery surfaces to increase traction
- Manage weight with diets
- Provide preventative care
- Be consistent with bloodwork and physical exam rechecks

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Surgical removal of the thyroid glands is generally a straightforward successful treatment that cures the disease, thereby eliminating the need for medications. However, it is a high-risk surgery that requires anesthesia, a surgeon, and can have complications. Some cats are not surgical candidates.

Radioactive-iodine therapy is considered the best current curative option with a 95% success rate and low side effects. During treatment, a specific quantity of radioactive iodine is given by injection that destroys only the abnormal thyroid tissue. Normal thyroid levels are expected within 1-2 weeks after treatment. This therapy requires approximately a week-long stay at a licensed facility and pre-screening tests. The initial cost is expensive, however, more money is saved over the life of the cat with fewer secondary health complications if the treatment is received early on in the disease process.

Prescription hyperthyroid diets are available, though typically this is the least successful method. They can play a role for cats that are not candidates for other options, and as an additional treatment.

Prognosis

With appropriate treatment, most cats have a favorable outcome for many years. Managing secondary diseases, such as hypertension, heart, and kidney disease, is critical. Without treatment, an afflicted cat will continue to lose weight and suffer from the symptoms and secondary diseases. A personalized treatment plan is important to discuss with your veterinarian.

Before your pet's condition becomes unmanageable or they are losing quality of life, it is important to begin end-of-life care discussions. Learn about pet hospice care and/or euthanasia services in your area so you are prepared.