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FELINE HYPERTHYROIDISM

Feline hyperthyroidism is very common and is characterized by an increase in the size and function of the thyroid gland. It is usually seen in older cats, but cats as young as 2 years of age have been diagnosed with the disease. Cats with this disease will frequently have an increased appetite and weight loss. They may have an increased level of activity that is greater than expected for an older cat. Vomiting and other signs of problems with the GI tract are red flags as well for this disease. Some cats just don't read the book and present with very few signs or other less typical medical problems. If a cat shows one of the many signs of this disease, testing for it is warranted.

Thyroid hormone levels can wax and wane in cats so that even if a cat has this disease it may not look like it on the basic screening test. If we think that your cat is showing signs of hyperthyroidism and its blood tests are inconclusive, we will suggest a second test or another test that will "trick" the thyroid into revealing itself. The test that "tricks" the thyroid is called a T3 suppression test.

Once a cat has been diagnosed with hyperthyroidism, treatment options are considered. Left untreated, the cat will ultimately become toxic from a high level of circulating thyroid hormone and be in a life-threatening situation. Hyperthyroidism is a treatable disease and depending on the treatment chosen, curable.

Three treatment options are available. One is to use radiation to destroy the affected tissue. It is the preferred method of treatment just as with this treatment in people, a dose of radioactive iodine is given. It affects the diseased portion of the thyroid leaving the unaffected tissue alone. It is the safest treatment and the one with the fewest complications. A cat will have to be hospitalized for 5 - 10 days, depending on the rate at which it metabolizes the iodine. For the first year periodic rechecks of thyroid and kidney function will be necessary after treatment, but generally no further medication is needed.

A second treatment option is the use of medication to try to decrease thyroid hormone production by the body. Medication usually must be given twice a day. Most cats will tolerate the medication, but about 20% will have side effects from it. The side effects range from GI disturbances and general malaise most commonly, to blood cell alteration and rarely, liver damage. Because of the potential for side effects, medical therapy must include rechecks of the blood work regularly.

A third option is surgical removal of the thyroid glands. This is a more invasive method of treatment but usually effective. On occasion, there are some serious metabolic consequences that occur after the surgery. About 5% of the time we will encounter problems. These cats also will need periodic rechecks of kidney function after the surgery. They may or may not need lifelong medication to replace a normal level of thyroid hormone.

These treatment choices may sound daunting at first. But remember that hyperthyroidism is a treatable disease. After treatment with radiation and surgery, we can cure most of the cases with a low incidence of complications. Giving medicine doesn't cure the disease, but it can certainly manage it. You have lots of choices. We will try to develop a treatment plan that will accommodate both you and your cat.