

Your Cat &

HYPERTHYROIDISM



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Animal Health Trust

Lanwades Park, Kentford

Newmarket, Suffolk CB8 7UU

This leaflet has been produced collaboratively with the Feline Advisory Bureau.

The Feline Advisory Bureau is a charity dedicated to the health and welfare of cats.

For further information please log-on to:
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Animal *Health* Trust
the science behind animal welfare

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HYPERTHYROIDISM IN CATS

Hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid glands) is a very common disorder of older cats. It is caused by an increased production of thyroid hormones from the thyroid glands in the neck. Although the clinical signs associated with hyperthyroidism can be quite dramatic, and cats can become seriously ill with this condition, most cases are completely treatable and cats usually make a complete recovery.

In most cases, the increased thyroid hormone production is due to a benign (non-cancerous) change and usually both thyroid glands are involved, although one may be affected more severely than the other. A malignant (cancerous) tumour (thyroid adenocarcinoma) causes less than 2% of cases of hyperthyroidism, but its treatment is more difficult.

Typical clinical signs

Hyperthyroidism is seen almost exclusively in middle- to old-aged cats, and is rare in cats less than 7 years of age. Affected cats usually develop a variety of signs, which become more severe as the disease progresses. Some cats may have other concomitant diseases that can complicate and even mask some of the clinical signs.

The 'classic' signs of hyperthyroidism are weight loss usually despite an increased appetite, increased thirst, increased irritability, and restlessness or hyperactivity. Many affected

cats have a rapid heart rate and an unkempt coat. Mild to moderate diarrhoea and/or vomiting are also quite common. Some affected cats will be noticeably intolerant of heat and seek out cooler places to sit.

Secondary complications

Excess thyroid hormones stimulate a faster heart rate and, over time, can cause thickening of the heart wall or even heart failure. However, once the hyperthyroidism is under control, the cardiac changes often improve. Hypertension (high blood pressure) is another complication seen in some hyperthyroid cats and, if present, must be controlled with drugs.

Reaching a diagnosis

If you, or your veterinary surgeon, suspect hyperthyroidism, the diagnosis can usually be confirmed simply with blood tests to measure thyroid hormone concentrations. Enlarged thyroid glands can often also be felt as small nodules in the neck. Additional blood tests may be needed to screen for other diseases (eg kidney failure) and sometimes x-rays will be needed to evaluate heart disease or other conditions. On rare occasions, blood tests do not give a definitive diagnosis of hyperthyroidism, but at specialist centres such as the AHT, special scans (technetium scans) can be performed to visualise the thyroid tissue and detect abnormalities.

Treatment

Medical management (drug therapy)

Anti-thyroid drugs are available as tablets, and these reduce the production of thyroid hormones. Although they often control the disease successfully, they do not cure it, so life-long therapy is needed (usually given once or twice daily). Occasionally side-effects develop to drug therapy and intermittent monitoring of blood samples is always recommended.

Surgical thyroidectomy

Surgical removal of the affected thyroid tissue (thyroidectomy) can produce a permanent cure and is a common treatment for many hyperthyroid cats. Generally this is a very successful procedure although, even after successful surgery, signs of hyperthyroidism occasionally develop again at a later time if previously unaffected thyroid tissue becomes diseased. To minimise surgical risks, cats are usually stabilised on medical therapy before being operated on. Surgery can sometimes interfere with the 'parathyroid glands' which control body calcium concentrations. It is recommended that cats are monitored closely in the three days following surgery to ensure problems do not develop in relation to this.

Radioactive iodine therapy

Radioactive iodine (I131) can also be used to provide a safe and effective cure for



Enlarged thyroid gland in the neck of a cat with hyperthyroidism.

hyperthyroidism. Like surgical thyroidectomy, it has the advantage of being curative in most cases with no ongoing treatment required. The radioiodine is administered as an injection given under the skin – the iodine being taken up by the active (abnormal) thyroid tissue, but not by any other body tissues. The selective accumulation of radioactive material in the abnormal tissues causes its destruction, but does not damage any surrounding tissues. In addition to being curative (in most cases), radioiodine has no serious side-effects and does not require an anaesthetic. However, its use is restricted to certain licensed centres such as the AHT and, following treatment, cats usually have to remain in the hospital for three weeks so that there is no exposure of owners to the radiation.