

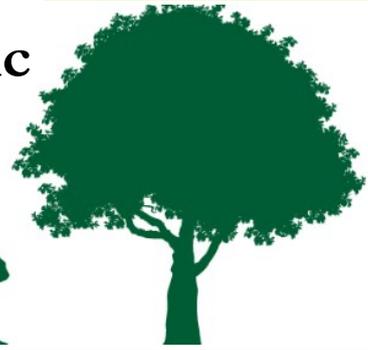
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Damory Veterinary Clinic

Small Animal Factsheet



FELINE HYPERTHYROIDISM

The thyroid glands are two small glands in the neck which secrete thyroid hormone into the bloodstream. This influences the function of many body systems. Overactivity of the thyroid gland is known as **hyperthyroidism** and is the most common hormonal problem seen in older cats

What is the cause of my cat getting hyperthyroidism?

The vast majority of cases arise as a result of a benign growth on one or both thyroid glands. In very rare cases the growth can be malignant (thyroid carcinoma)

What are the symptoms of hyperthyroidism?

The symptoms of hyperthyroidism are many and varied. Problems are usually seen in middle to old age and it is uncommon to see the problem in cats younger than 8 years old. The commonest symptom is weight loss, despite an increase in appetite. There may be increased thirst, a poor hair coat, hyperactivity or irritable behaviour and sometimes vomiting and / or diarrhoea. A vet's examination may reveal an increased heart rate with a heart murmur. There is usually a lump in the neck in the region of the thyroid gland. A rarer form of the disease involves weight loss with a poor appetite and dull and depressed behaviour. In severe cases of hyperthyroidism, heart failure may develop which can lead to fatality.

How do you diagnose hyperthyroidism?

Diagnosis usually involves examination of a blood sample for increased levels of thyroid hormone. It is usually sensible for other blood tests to be carried out to check for other possible causes of the above symptoms, especially with regard to kidney disease. The latter is also common in middle to old aged cats and the presence of kidney disease in a hyperthyroid cat will affect the decision as to how to treat the thyroid problem.

What are the treatment options?

Treatment of hyperthyroidism falls into 3 categories. The following information is an overview and if your cat is diagnosed with hyperthyroidism one of our vets will have a discussion with you about the options available.

Radioactive Iodine Treatment

The "gold standard" definitive treatment, however the initial costs for this is comparable to 18 months of medical treatment (tablets or transdermal gel) and will require 2-4 weeks of hospitalisation dependent on circumstances. Our closest clinic with facilities to provide this treatment is The Feline Centre at Langford, Bristol Veterinary School.

Surgical Removal of One or Both Thyroid Glands

This also has the potential to achieve a long term cure and can be carried out at our clinic. Surgery is usually preceded by approximately 2 weeks of medical treatment with tablets as indicated below, and the decision about this is made at the time of surgery.

This is to try and stabilise the condition, especially with regard to the heart function, to reduce the risk of a general anaesthetic. One or both thyroid glands may need removal

Taking both thyroid glands out is a more risky procedure due to the close association of the parathyroid glands with the thyroid glands.

The parathyroids are responsible for controlling the levels of calcium in the body. Surgical removal of the thyroid glands entails a well recognised risk that the parathyroid gland tissue may be removed with the thyroid gland, or its blood supply may be damaged such that it does not function properly. While every effort is made to avoid such complications, this can occur in some cases. Whenever we take out both thyroid glands your cat will stay with us overnight in order to monitor for signs of low calcium levels, such as twitching or more seriously fits, and the calcium level is tested the day after surgery. In a very small percentage of these cats, temporary or permanent medication with calcium and vitamin D may be required. It is more usual that this medication will only be required for a number of weeks until the blood supply to the parathyroids is restored.

It is possible that only one thyroid gland may be affected, so in this case we would remove the affected gland and then monitor for signs of hyperthyroidism following this. The other gland, although seemingly unaffected at the time of surgery, may still have a tendency to develop problems of over-activity at a later stage, resulting in a recurrence of the original symptoms noted and a need for further surgery.

Medical Treatment

This currently relies upon the use of a drug called methimazole or carbimazole. These drugs do not cure the disease but keep it at bay by reducing the output of thyroid hormone from the thyroid glands. Depending on the thyroid levels and which drug you are using once or twice daily dosing is required. Increasing doses may be required if the medication is used for long term treatment.

The most common side effects encountered appear to be poor appetite and vomiting, although rarer, more serious side effects may occur. Side effects do, however, usually disappear if drug treatment is ceased. It is recommended that the tablets are not allowed to come into contact with your skin as absorption of the drug through the skin is theoretically possible. We therefore advise you to wear disposable latex gloves or similar (e.g. rubber gloves which can be washed thoroughly afterwards) to handle the tablets.

If your cat is not amenable to taking medication in the form of a tablet, there is an alternative method available in the form of a transdermal gel. This is a gel format of methimazole which is applied on the inside of your cat's ear twice a day. Many cats tolerate this extremely well. It can take a little longer to achieve acceptable thyroid levels than with tablets.

It will be necessary to monitor the response to treatment by analysis of blood samples for thyroid hormone levels. We need to examine your cat at least every 6 months before we can give you repeat prescriptions. In the early stages of treatment we will probably need more regular check-ups to monitor weight, heart rate and other indicators of a good response to treatment.

Long term treatment with tablets or transdermal gel obviously requires you to be able to give your cat regular medication. We tend to offer medical treatment where we are concerned about the risks of anaesthesia and surgery or where the owner does not wish to opt for alternative treatment.

What are the complications associated with treatment?

Kidney disease is a common problem in older cats and the over-activity of the thyroid gland may actually help cats which also have kidney problems. This appears to be related to the increased blood flow to the kidneys and hence increased filtering out of waste products by the kidneys in cats with hyperthyroidism. Treatment of hyperthyroidism in these cases may actually unmask kidney disease by reducing the blood flow to the kidneys. Cats with evidence of kidney problems prior to treatment of hyperthyroidism will be monitored for any worsening of kidney disease after initiating thyroid treatment.

Conclusion

Hyperthyroidism can appear to be a complex disease but it can be very successfully treated in a very large majority of cats which develop the problem.

Hopefully the above information will answer any questions you have about hyperthyroidism but if you would like to discuss anything further then please contact one of the vets at the practice. We can also give some guidelines as to the costs of treatment although these may vary as there may be additional costs of monitoring blood tests after treatment, tablet medication after surgery etc, and variable costs of surgery depending on the time taken to remove the thyroid gland(s) etc.