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Ask the Vet:

Hyperthyroid disease is common among mature cats

One of my memorable early practice experiences was when a woman presented her cat to me for examination because she had endured all that she could. Her once lazy house cat, Sabrina, was waking her at 5 a.m. each day by sitting on her chest and screaming meows for food.

Indeed, I found that Sabrina had lost weight since her previous examination, despite eating much more food, according to her owner. She had a racing fast heart rate with a new heart murmur, and had a nodule under the skin of her neck in the area of her thyroid gland.

Blood tests confirmed my suspicion that Sabrina had developed hyperthyroidism. Fortunately, medical therapy effectively put both Sabrina and her tired owner at ease once again.

Hyperthyroidism is one of the most common gland-associated diseases in cats. Despite how commonly this disease occurs, veterinary scientists have not yet identified a specific cause, so that to date, we do not have a means of prevention.

The disease occurs when the thyroid gland secretes excess thyroid hormone without response to the normal signals from the body to slow the secretion. Excess thyroid hormone creates a hypermetabolic state that affects many systems of the body.

Outwardly, we commonly see symptoms of extreme hunger, muscle mass loss, hyperactivity, vomiting and/or malodorous diarrhea. An abnormally rapid heart rate and heart murmur are commonly found on physical exam.

The disease occurs most often in older adult or geriatric cats. Among older cats, the presence of more than one disease, such as primary intestinal disease, diabetes or kidney disease, is not unusual in combination with hyperthyroidism.

Management of multiple disease conditions in the same patient does make control of the illness more complicated, but usually not impossible. Close monitoring and open communication between owner and veterinarian are essential to truly facilitate helping the cat.

Not all cats who develop hyperthyroidism follow such a classic pattern of signs and symptoms. Many cats diagnosed with hyperthyroidism are examined because of symptoms of decreasing appetite and lethargy. Still, others are examined because of very mild, vague symptoms such that the cat is just not quite herself or himself. Occasionally, evidence of hyperthyroidism is found when the veterinarian performs wellness examinations that include lab tests.

Severe weight loss, heart disease and GI abnormalities have been avoided entirely in several of my hyperthyroid patients, because we noticed a trend of rising thyroid hormone levels by comparing the levels measured for wellness evaluations over months or years. With early recognition of hyperthyroidism, we are able to control the thyroid hormone levels before the debilitating consequences develop.

Appropriate treatment of a hyperthyroid cat first involves evaluation of all aspects of the cat's health. Other health needs must be recognized and considered when choosing a therapy plan for an individual.

The most common therapies include orally administered medication, radioactive iodine therapy and therapeutic diet therapy. Each treatment option has advantages and disadvantages, depending on the individual cat and the cat's family.

Of course, each cat that requires therapy also requires a dedicated human owner to help the cat with the care. Timely treatments and tests for monitoring of therapeutic effect and overall health are needed for successful management of a hyperthyroid cat.

For management of any disease of pets, open discussion with your pet's veterinarian about what the pet will accept and what the pet's family is able to do to help can be just as important as the diagnosis or the treatment itself.