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Cats on Call Newsletter, Volume 9, December 2007

256 U.S. Route One, Scarborough ME 04074 – (207) 883-7000

Do you more than two times per month come home to find vomit on your dining room rug? Does your feline companion occasionally defecate outside the box? Have you ever noticed blood or soft stool in the litter pan? Does your cat have a normal or increased appetite yet she is losing weight? These are all early signs of a very common disease called IBD or Inflammatory Bowel Disease. As the name implies, IBD can involve the small or large bowel, but in most cases the stomach is primarily affected. The disease can extend out to involve the liver and pancreas as well. Although cats of any age can be affected, middle-aged or older cats are more susceptible. The sooner IBD is diagnosed, the easier it is to treat and the better the long-term prognosis. >'<

What are the causes?

Veterinarians do not know for sure what causes the disorder. They suspect that the problem is triggered when an animal's immune system becomes hypersensitive to an antigen. Two different mistakes could be happening. Either the body could be over-reacting to a foreign substance such as a virus, bacteria or worms, or the immune system may be having an inappropriate reaction to a normal substance such as food or fur. When the immune system is mobilized, it sends its warrior cells (white blood cells) to do battle. This causes inflammation in the tissue surrounding the digestive system. It is also believed that if the intestinal lining is damaged, then the antigens can penetrate deeply and cause an even stronger immune response. There does not appear to be a single type or cause of IBD. A host of factors are implicated, and these can vary from cat to cat.

How is IBD Diagnosed?

Because of its various causes, IBD is not simply diagnosed. There is no one IBD test, and the most common signs- chronic vomiting and/or diarrhea- can signal many different disorders. The only way to properly diagnosis IBD is by ruling out other diseases. "It is a diagnosis of exclusion which involves many steps." We will do our best to guide you through these pathways to a comfortable place for you and your cat.

The first step is to perform fresh fecal exams to check for parasitic and bacterial agents. The next step will likely be an analysis of your cat's blood and urine to check for illnesses such as feline leukemia virus, immunodeficiency virus, hyperthyroidism, and liver and kidney disease. In order to rule out a food allergy you may be asked to put your cat on an elimination diet. The results of these first few steps often indicate the need for abdominal radiographs and/or ultrasound. Finally, the most definitive of the diagnostic tests is the microscopic examination of tiny pieces of the intestinal or stomach lining.

A tissue sample (biopsy) has traditionally been taken through a small incision in the abdomen. Nowadays, we commonly slide an endoscope through the cat's mouth or rectum in order to collect the necessary biopsy. Both of these latter procedures are the only ones which require general anesthesia. Cats with IBD are not known to have any greater risk for anesthesia. Thus a proper diagnosis can be reached with no worry.

How is Treatment Achieved?

A combination of dietary management and medical therapy will successfully manage IBD in most cats. Because there is no single best treatment, your cat's doctor may need to try several different combinations in order to determine the best therapy for your cat.

Dietary Management

Sensitivity to food antigens contributes to the inflammation in some cats, so a change of diet often provides symptomatic relief. A bland diet alone may control the vomiting or diarrhea, but many cats require a protein and carbohydrate source that is brand new to the cat. These hypoallergenic diets are hard to find over the counter, but our office carries a nice variety of flavors. The newest offering is a formula called Z/D. This product uses the same ingredients most cats are fed, but the proteins are altered in such a way that they no longer trigger an immune reaction. In rare cases, the addition of dietary fiber is the best treatment for IBD. →

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Medical Management

It may take several weeks or longer for felines to improve after a diet change. For those patients with severe or worsening symptoms, such as significant weight loss, simultaneous medical treatment is truly indicated. A wide variety of drugs can be considered to treat IBD, and given the prevalence of this disease, many more are under development. Some of the factors which play into the choice of medication include the severity of the symptoms, how often the symptoms occur and the cat's overall condition i.e. the presence of any other underlying diseases. Many times more than one medication need to be given. Here are a few commonly used medications for consideration.

Corticosteroids are commonly used to treat IBD. These drugs have potent anti-inflammatory and immunosuppressive properties with relatively few side effects in cats. Additionally, corticosteroids may stimulate the appetite and enhance intestinal water absorption thus resulting in more trips to the litter box. Two forms are commonly used. **Prednisolone** has been used for years. It can be given as a pill, liquid or trans-dermal (across the skin) ointment. The newest corticosteroid, **budesonide**, comes from human medicine. It has the advantage that it is presumed not to be absorbed systemically, thus causing fewer side effects. This drug also can come as a pill or liquid. Both of these medications require a urine and blood test twice yearly for monitoring of possible side effects.

Antibiotics can be help helpful when the side effects of steroids are too strong or when they have failed to adequately control the disease. **Metronidazole** therapy is the most commonly prescribed antibiotic because it also has some anti-inflammatory properties. Side effects can involve the blood and are rare but are completely reversible if caught early. For this reason, regular drug monitoring is required when the patient is on this drug. **Tylosin** is an antibiotic borrowed from large animal medicine. It has not been officially approved for use in cats, but it has been used for decades in cats with no reported side effects. Although this inexpensive drug does not require any blood monitoring, both it and metronidazole have a very bitter taste and thus must be disguised or given in a gel capsule to avoid any frothing at the mouth.

Sulfasalazine is the antibiotic of choice if large bowel inflammation (colitis) is the predominant complaint. Other antibiotics such as amoxicillin, clindamycin and enrofloxacin are also occasionally prescribed. None of these require any drug monitoring.

Other Medications

A wide variety of other classifications of drugs can be used for IBD. Some of these include immunosuppressive drugs such as **Leukeran**,™ and **cyclosporine**, antispasmodics or anti-hypermotility drugs such as **metoclopramide**, and antacids such as **famotidine (Pepcid**™). Some cats are meticulous groomers of themselves and fellow cats. Since hair is not digestible, it could easily be a source of chronic irritation to the stomach or intestines. Frequent brushing and the use of hairball medications (**laxaire**™ and **laxatone**™) are recommended to cats with IBD, especially if they have a history of vomiting or passing many hairballs.

What is the Prognosis for Cats with IBD?

It is rarely possible to cure inflammatory bowel disease, but most cases can be satisfactorily controlled by medication and dietary management. Relapses can occur if the treatment regimen is not followed completely. If IBD progresses too long without intervention the most common result is cancer. IBD is not a disease your veterinarian can diagnose and resolve with only one visit. The good news is that it can be treated with patience. IBD cats can lead quality lives.

News Flash: Update on HTD

Researchers believe that they have found the cause of hyperthyroid disease. It is a common flame retardant placed on household rugs and furniture as well as our clothing. It has leached into the water and thus the food chain. This explains the high correlation of this disease with some canned fish foods, as well as the shared incident rate we have with our feline friends.