

Cat Talk

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Feline Asthma

Wheezing, coughing, or difficulty breathing in your kitty should not be taken lightly. These could be the first signs of feline allergic bronchitis, commonly known as feline asthma. Signs may be occasional or frequent. If left untreated, they may become life-threatening. It is estimated in the United States that in a population of over 12 million cats, at least one percent, or 120,000, cats suffer from feline asthma.

The occurrence of clinical signs in cats with asthma is extremely variable, and for some cats, it is as low as one episode in a lifetime. For others, the signs are seasonal, and for some cats, flare-ups are daily and year-round. As in humans, the contributing factors to feline asthma are many: genetic predisposition, as well as parasitic, bacterial and viral infectious agents and environmental allergens.

Many owners mistake an asthma attack for a "hairball" cough. It can be very difficult to distinguish the two coughs by observation alone. Diagnosis of feline asthma begins in the veterinary office with a stethoscope. By listening carefully, a doctor can often appreciate harsh lung sounds, including crackles or wheezes, or a prolonged expiration due to narrowed airways. Sometimes, however, it is only possible to hear lung problems immediately after an attack, so your veterinarian may wish to see your cat again right after an "episode". If an abnormal lung sound is heard, further diagnostics are generally employed to rule out other causes for lung disease; these include lungworms, heartworms, bacterial infection, airway obstruction, and less commonly in cats, heart failure

Often, the first diagnostic tool is an x-ray of the chest. The doctor will look for changes in the lungs such as thickened airways, mucus in the airways, or a flattened diaphragm. Further diagnostics might include bloodwork to rule out heartworm disease or to determine if allergic disease and/or infection are present. Also, in some cases, bronchoalveolar lavage or "a flushing of the lungs" is done. The fluid from bronchoalveolar lavage may be cultured to look for infectious organisms and to determine the proper course of antibiotic treatment. Finally, ultrasound of the heart and lungs may be done, as well as bronchoscopy (use of a fiberoptic cable to look directly into the airways).

Once the diagnosis of feline asthma has been made, treatment is begun immediately. Two general types of drugs are used to make breathing easier. An anti-inflammatory drug decreases the swelling and discomfort of airways and a bronchodilator is given to open airways. Many of the medications may be given by mouth, for example, oral steroids (e.g., prednisolone) and oral antihistamines such as cyproheptadine. Orally administered bronchodilators might include theophylline or terbutaline. Your veterinarian may give injectable steroids if a severe attack has occurred. If your cat is breathing with his/her mouth open or if his/her gums appear gray or purple, this is an emergency situation! Call your veterinarian immediately!

Inhalant forms of anti-inflammatories and bronchodilators i.e. inhalers, have been used for people very successfully. A similar response has been found for asthmatic cats.

Pediatric human inhalers may be adapted for use in cats, and currently, an inhaler specifically for cats will soon be available. Fluticasone (Flovent® or Proventil®) may be administered to cats twice daily to help keep symptoms under control. Albuterol(Ventolin®) may be used adjunctively for times of acute attacks. Cats are surprisingly accepting of this form of treatment. Many clients find it easier than having to give a pill!

One final promising treatment for cats is zafirlukast (Accolate®), a medication that inhibits the release of inflammatory mediators (substances leading to allergic attacks) in the lungs. This is given by mouth twice daily and may be helpful in controlling asthma attacks for many cats! As most of you may already know, our clinic kitty, Midnight is an asthmatic and is currently doing very well on Accolate!

Holiday Hazard Reminders

Keep a close eye on loved kitties and other pets to keep them safe!

Decorations: Ribbons, tinsel, string, ornaments and electrical cords are very tempting, but may cause life-threatening intestinal obstruction. Bitter Apple spray® is recommended to deter chewing of electrical cords.

Christmas tree: Pine needles can cause intestinal obstruction or perforation; tree water may contain toxic chemicals, so never leave kitty alone with the tree! Ornaments are also a temptation Avoid placing glass balls within reach.

Plants: Poinsettias, mistletoe, holly, and ivy are toxic. We have a large list of poisonous plants which we would be happy to share with you.

Candles: It is all too easy to catch a passing tail or tummy fur on fire!

Treats: Avoid feeding overly rich table foods (may cause painful gastroenteritis!). Onions and garlic break down cat red blood cells.

Antifreeze: Only $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp./pound body weight is *lethal* in cats. Canned “snow” for your windows contains antifreeze and is therefore very toxic.

Rock salt/deicers: These are hard on toes, and may cause abrasions!