

Hyperthyroidism in Cats.

Hyperthyroidism, or an over-active thyroid, is a condition where the thyroid gland(s) in the neck become enlarged and produce too much thyroid hormone.

High thyroid levels increase the bodies metabolic rate, so your cat will usually lose weight, even though their appetite is good, as they are burning off energy too quickly.

Untreated it affects the heart, causing the heart rate to increase and the heart wall to become thicker. Over time this can progress to heart failure. It also causes high blood pressure which can cause damage to the kidneys, eyes, heart and brain.

Thankfully it is a disease which usually responds very well to treatment and most cats will have a normal life when treated for this condition.

What signs suggest my cat has Hyperthyroidism?

Any of the following signs can be seen in cats with hyperthyroidism:

-  Weight loss, despite a good (and often increased) appetite
-  Change in behaviour, becoming more restless or irritable
-  Increased thirst
-  Poor coat quality
-  Vomiting and or diarrhoea

How do you diagnose Hyperthyroidism?

A simple blood test to check your cat's thyroid level usually is all that is needed to diagnose this condition.

We would advise checking for other diseases such as kidney disease on the same blood test, as the condition usually affects older cats who may have more than one problem.

We may also advise checking a urine sample and measuring your cats blood pressure.

There are several treatment options for managing an overactive thyroid. There is no right or wrong option to choose, each treatment has its pros and cons. These are discussed below to help you make the right choice for you and your cat.

When treating cats with an overactive thyroid we also need to monitor their kidney function, as when the thyroid levels return to normal it can sometimes unmask kidney disease.



Treating Hyperthyroidism.



Daily medication:

Medication can be given to block the body's ability to make and release thyroid hormone. This is available as a tablet or liquid.

Most cats respond very well to this treatment, with a success rate of over 95%.

Usually the medication is given twice a day. We need to monitor the effect of the treatment with blood tests to make sure we get your cats thyroid hormone level to an optimal level.

It has the advantage that if the thyroid level drops too low (or doesn't drop enough) we can adjust the dose being given. How often your cat will need a blood test will vary between cases, but usually we would advise a blood test 3 weeks after any dose change. Once your cat's thyroid hormone reaches an appropriate level we advise blood tests much less often.

Medication must be given lifelong to maintain control. Generally, it is very well tolerated, but there is a risk of side effects such as gut irritation. Rarely facial itching, liver disease or effects on the body's blood cells counts can be seen.

Initial costs of this option are relatively low but will be ongoing for the rest of your cat's life.



Surgery

Surgical removal of one or both of the thyroid glands can be performed. This has the advantage of being a long-term or permanent cure, with no need for long term medication or diet change. It is a rapid treatment as thyroid levels will reduce within a few days.

We normally advise the thyroid level is stabilised with daily medication before performing the surgery, which usually takes several weeks. This is to reduce the risk of general anaesthesia.

Usually we remove 1 thyroid gland at a time; some cats will need their 2nd thyroid gland removing later in life if the 2nd gland becomes affected.

There is a very small risk of damaging the parathyroid gland with this surgery which can lead to serious problems with calcium balance.

Rarely, cats can become hyperthyroid again despite having their thyroid glands removed if thyroid tissue elsewhere in the body becomes diseased.



Prescription Diet

Hills® y-d® is a prescription diet food which has limited iodine content. Restricting the iodine content decreases the body's ability to produce thyroid hormone. It is available as both a canned diet or a biscuit diet.

It is reported to be successful at managing hyperthyroidism in 8 out of 10 cats.

The difficulty with this option is that your cat must not eat any other food at all for the rest of its life or the treatment will be unsuccessful. This usually makes it unsuitable for cats who go outside.



Radioactive Iodine

This is another permanent treatment option and is successful in around 95% of cats. Radioactive iodine is given as a single injection, usually under sedation. It is then taken up by abnormal thyroid tissue, so the abnormal thyroid tissue is destroyed. It is not taken up by other tissues in the body so is a very safe treatment. Its biggest advantages are that normally no long-term medication is required, it can kill abnormal thyroid cells anywhere in the body and minimal follow up tests are required.

Most cats' thyroid levels reduce to normal within a few weeks, but it can take up to 6 months. However giving this treatment will temporarily make your cat radioactive there are special precautions that must be taken when choosing this treatment.

There are a limited number of places in the country your cat can receive this treatment due to the special requirements handling radioactive iodine. Our nearest centre is in Wetherby.

Your cat would have to be hospitalised for a minimum of 5 days, sometimes this is longer. It takes around 6 weeks for your cat to stop being radioactive. While often cats can be at home in this time frame, care is needed when handling your cats waste and contact with your cat has to be limited for your safety. This is particularly important if children or women of child-bearing age are in the house.

The centre also recommends several additional blood and urine tests to ensure your cat is in the best possible health before starting radioactive iodine treatment, as contact with your cat for the initial few days must be minimised. Rarely the treatment can make your cats thyroid levels drop too low and mean that tablets to supplement their thyroid level need to be given.

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