



Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is a common problem in older cats, caused by increased of the thyroid hormones (T3 and T4). The disease usually cause weight loss and an increased appetite as the most obvious symptoms. Diagnosed early, it can be usually be treated effectively, leading to significant improvement in weight and condition. Untreated, it leads to other problems including heart disease and diabetes.



What is thyroid hormone?

Thyroid hormone is produced by the paired thyroid glands, situated in the neck. Thyroid hormone controls the metabolic rate and activity levels of the body. Increased levels of thyroid hormones cause the body to work faster. This causes increased activity levels, increased heart rate, and increased energy requirements.

Signs of hyperthyroidism

- Increased appetite
- Increased drinking
- Weight loss
- Poor coat condition
- Restlessness or hyperactivity
- Diarrhoea or vomiting
- Rapid heart rate

How is hyperthyroidism diagnosed?

The symptoms, combined with an obviously enlarged thyroid gland in the neck, are usually suggestive of hyperthyroidism. The diagnosis is confirmed using blood tests to check the levels of thyroid hormone.

Because the condition can lead to heart disease and high blood pressure, we will often investigate these problems in cats suspected of having hyperthyroidism.

We usually also run blood tests to look for other conditions such as diabetes and kidney disease, which are also common in older cats, and may occur at the same time. Presence of these conditions may affect the success of treatment, and the choice of treatment.



Treatment of hyperthyroidism

The aim of treatment is to reduce the level of thyroid hormone in the blood to normal. This can be achieved by surgical removal of the abnormal thyroid gland, by medication, by radioactive iodine therapy, or by a specific diet. Each treatment option has advantages and disadvantages, but all are usually successful.

1. Medical therapy

Medical therapy involves giving tablets daily that block the production of thyroid hormone by the thyroid glands. The treatment is safe, although side effects including vomiting and skin irritation are occasionally seen. The main disadvantages of medical treatment are that it requires the administration of tablets for the rest of the cat's life, and that regular checks and blood tests are necessary to ensure the appropriate dose of medication.

2. Surgery

Surgical removal of the enlarged thyroid is possible. Medical therapy is usually given for three weeks prior to surgery to stabilise the condition and reduce anaesthetic risk. Surgery avoids the need for long term treatment - however does carry the usual risks associated with anaesthesia and surgery. There is also a risk of recurrence of hyperthyroidism after surgery, as the second thyroid may become affected at a later date.

3. Radioactive iodine

Radioactive iodine is used to destroy the thyroid glands, so reducing thyroid hormone production. This treatment avoids the need for long term medication, and also avoids the need for anaesthesia and surgery. However, due to the risk of radioactive contamination with treatment, it requires isolation of affected cats at specialist practices for up to six weeks.

4. Diet

A commercial diet with restricted iodine is available. This limits the cat's ability to produce thyroid hormone; however the diet needs to be fed exclusively, and many cats find it unpalatable.

Which treatment is best for each cat will depend on several factors such as ease of giving tablets, other conditions affecting anaesthetic risk, and ability to travel to a specialist centre. These issues will be discussed in each individual case to help you make the best decision for your cat.

