



Diabetes in cats

Diabetes is a common problem in middle aged and older cats, and it appears to be on the increase. Although many people are daunted by the prospect of having to treat a diabetic cat, with time and commitment, it can be very rewarding. Although most cats will need insulin injections initially, in the long term many cats can be managed by dietary control alone.

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is caused by a lack of insulin. Insulin enables sugar to pass from the blood stream into the body's tissues, where it is used as an energy source. Insufficient insulin causes sugar to get "trapped" in the blood stream, where the body can't use it. Instead the body uses fat as an energy source. The breakdown of fat causes a build up of toxins called ketones.



Signs of diabetes

- **Weight loss**
- **Increased drinking**
- **Increase or decrease in appetite**
- **Inappropriate urination**
- **Vomiting**
- **Lack of energy**

These symptoms can be seen in several conditions in older cats, so although the signs may be suggestive of diabetes, further tests will always be necessary to confirm the diagnosis.

How is diabetes diagnosed?

The presence of high blood sugar, or sugar in the urine, are both suggestive of diabetes. The diagnosis can be confirmed by determining the amount of "fructosamine" in the blood, which gives an estimate of the average blood sugar level over the last two weeks.

Because of the high incidence of multiple diseases in older cats, we routinely run a blood screen looking for conditions such as kidney disease and thyroid disease - as these will affect the success of diabetic treatment. We also check the blood pressure and weight of diabetic cats for monitoring purposes.



Diabetic stabilisation

Treatment of diabetes usually requires twice daily insulin injections. The amount of insulin required is different for each cat.

An initial insulin dose is normally calculated based on your cat's weight, and blood sugar level. We then need to assess your cat's response to this dose, and adjust it up or down accordingly. Regular blood tests are used to make these adjustments, and it is usually necessary to keep your cat in the practice for some of these tests. The blood tests are carried out approximately once a week, until we have found the correct dose of insulin. This process of repeated blood tests and dose adjustment is called stabilisation, and may take a few weeks or several months. Some cats prove difficult to stabilise, and we may need to try different types of insulin in these cases.

Long term treatment

You will be shown how to give insulin injections at home. It is important to maintain a regular routine, with insulin injections and food being given at the same time each day, in order to keep insulin requirements constant.

Monitoring your cat's weight, drinking and eating will help you assess how well the diabetes is under control. Regular health checks by the vet, with blood tests, are also important. Changes in insulin dose may be recommended following these checks.

Low carbohydrate diets have been shown to make stabilisation of diabetes in cats, and in some cases may avoid the need for long term insulin. Various commercial low carbohydrate diets are available for diabetic treatment.



Treatment of diabetes in cats takes a lot of time and effort, and can be expensive. It requires a daily routine, regular injections, and frequent veterinary visits. It isn't for everyone, but it can be a very rewarding experience.

Regular check-ups are important for all animals on long term medication, to assess the progress of disease, and to monitor for other conditions that might affect treatment. This is particularly true in older patients, where multiple concurrent diseases are not uncommon.