



Kidney disease

Kidney disease affects around a fifth of cats over fifteen years of age, but can also occur in younger cats. Traditionally it is a disease with a poor prognosis, and there is still no cure for kidney failure, however a greater understanding of the disease means that with early diagnosis and treatment, many affected cats can now live a happy life for several years.

The role of the kidneys

The main role of the kidney is to remove waste products (called “uraemic toxins”) from the blood, which are produced in the liver by the processing and breakdown of protein. In high concentrations these toxins cause damage to blood cells, stomach ulceration, and irritation to the brain and nervous system. Eventually, they will lead to coma and death.

The kidney also has a role in stimulating blood cell production, and in controlling body fluids, minerals and blood pressure.



Signs of kidney disease

The early signs of kidney disease are vague, and may be put down to old age. Common signs include:

- Loss of appetite
- Increased thirst
- Lethargy
- Anaemia
- Blindness
- Muscle weakness
- Smelly breath
- Weight loss
- Poor coat
- Odd behaviour

What causes kidney disease?

There are several causes of kidney disease, including infection, tumours, immune diseases and toxins. In many cases the exact cause is unknown. However, once the kidneys become affected, the normal repair mechanisms usually cause further damage. The result is progressive disease producing “end stage kidneys”.



How is kidney disease diagnosed

Kidney disease is confirmed using a combination of blood tests and urine tests. We also advise checking the blood pressure as high blood pressure (“hypertension”) can be a cause of ongoing kidney damage. Regular checks are important to monitor the effects of kidney disease, and adjust treatment accordingly.

How can we treat kidney disease?

- Feeding a specific “renal” diet has been shown to be the single most significant factor in determining survival of cats with kidney disease.
- Measurement of blood pressure is important, both to control progression of kidney disease, and to prevent other effects of hypertension.
- Monitoring and controlling mineral levels (especially potassium and phosphorus) will make affected cats feel better.
- Control of urinary tract infections (“cystitis”) prevents further damage to the kidneys from bacterial infection.
- Maintaining fluid intake by having drinking water freely available, and using flavoured water, will prevent dehydration. This can be supplemented by subcutaneous and / or intravenous fluid administration.
- Nausea and vomiting are common in moderate to severe kidney disease, and a reduced appetite can be seen even in fairly mild cases. These symptoms can be controlled with a variety of drugs.
- “ACE inhibitors” are used if there is significant protein loss through the kidneys.



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