

Pancreatitis in the Cat

Pancreatitis describes an inflammation in the pancreas. The pancreas is an organ situated next to the liver and small intestine, and is important in producing insulin, which enables our organs to utilise sugar, and digestive enzymes to help breakdown food into small particles that can be absorbed into the bloodstream.



Why does pancreatitis occur?

The enzymes produced by the pancreas are very good at digestion and there are many protective mechanisms to ensure that these enzymes do not begin functioning until they are released in the small intestine. However, if something goes wrong with these protective mechanisms, the digestive enzymes begin functioning whilst they are still in the pancreas, resulting in digestion of pancreatic tissue and subsequent inflammation. This can occur for a number of reasons, but the majority of the time the underlying cause is unknown. Often pancreatitis may occur in association with liver and/or intestinal disease.

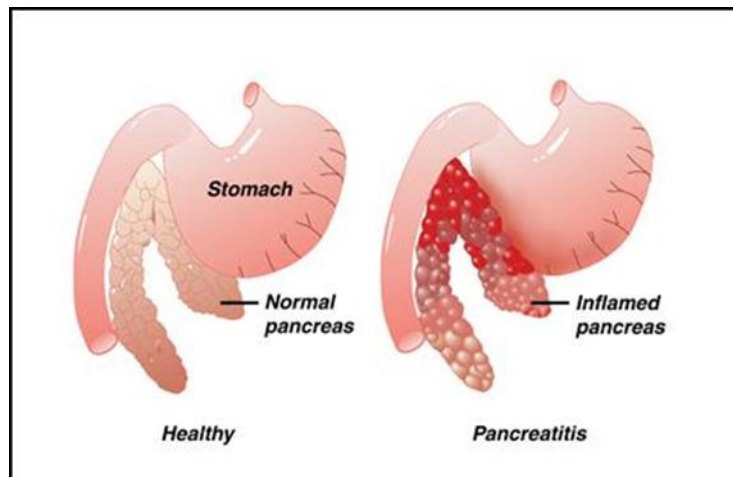


Diagram showing healthy and inflamed pancreas.

What signs will my cat show?

The signs vary depending on the severity of the disease. With mild pancreatitis only lethargy and anorexia may be apparent. Vomiting, abdominal discomfort and jaundice may occur, or signs associated with a concurrent intestinal or liver disease may predominate. It is also important to consider that cats are very good at hiding their symptoms. 'Purring' is not always an effective indicator that all is well with your cat.

How is pancreatitis diagnosed?

Pancreatitis is very challenging to diagnose, and is sometimes a presumptive diagnosis is made, based on excluding lots of other causes of your cats signs. It is important that routine blood tests are performed to exclude other disorders like liver disease. X-rays and ultrasound can be useful for excluding other diseases, and ultrasound in particular may be more useful for diagnosing severe pancreatitis. However, the changes in the pancreas can be very difficult to see and a very experienced ultrasound operator is required. In mild pancreatitis, often no changes can be seen with ultrasound.

How is pancreatitis treated?

Unfortunately, there is not a treatment that will specifically resolve the pancreatitis. The treatment that can be administered is only supportive, treating all the signs that occur to allow the inflammation in the pancreas to resolve of its own accord. The treatment depends on the severity of the disease. With very severe pancreatitis, aggressive intravenous fluid therapy will be required, together with anti-vomiting drugs, and pain relief. It is very important that cats receive their full nutritional requirements and so often if they are not eating a feeding tube will have to be placed. Severe pancreatitis requires intensive nursing care and treatment. With mild pancreatitis, pain relief and appetite stimulating drugs may be enough to relieve the clinical signs. Any concurrent disease, such as liver or intestinal disease will need specific treatment if present.

What is the prognosis for pancreatitis?

The prognosis for mild pancreatitis is generally good, however it can be a recurring condition, so once a cat has suffered this once it may recur regularly. The prognosis for severe pancreatitis however can be guarded as sometimes despite aggressive treatment the inflammation in the pancreas continues to progress.

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