

Hyperthyroidism and Your Cat

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What is hyperthyroidism?

Hyperthyroidism is a relatively common disease that is generally seen in middle-aged to older cats. It occurs when the thyroid gland becomes overactive. Because thyroid hormone is tied to metabolism, owners will often notice that their cat is extra hungry and thirsty, and urinates more. They can seem hyperactive, and display weight loss which is often dramatic. They may lose interest in grooming, so their coats often appear rough and lose their normal luster.

How is hyperthyroidism diagnosed?

A general workup for any cat that is eating/drinking/urinating more and losing weight consists of full labwork. This includes a complete blood count (CBC), a chemistry panel which tells us about your cat's organ function, a thyroid level (T4), and a urinalysis. This will screen for hyperthyroidism as well as other common diseases which cause these symptoms, including kidney disease, diabetes, and liver disease.

If the T4 comes back elevated, this is diagnostic for hyperthyroidism and is enough information for us to start treatment. There is a "gray zone" of early hyperthyroidism-if your cat's T4 falls in this range, we will recommend checking a free T4, which is the active form of thyroid hormone in the body. If this is high we will start treatment.

How is hyperthyroidism treated?

The general goal of treating hyperthyroidism is to decrease your cat's production of thyroid hormone. This can be done in a variety of ways. The most common form of treatment is an oral medication called tapazole, which is generally available as either a liquid or a pill. It is given twice a day for your cat's whole life. It is also available as a transdermal gel which is absorbed in the skin of the ear. The absorption is not always very reliable, so this option is not usually our first choice but may be an option for some cats that resist oral medications.

There is a prescription diet called Hills Y/D that has no iodine in it. Iodine is a building block for production of thyroid hormone, so if there is no iodine in your cat's diet, they are unable to make thyroid hormone. If you choose this treatment option keep in mind your cat cannot eat ANYTHING other than this diet, including treats, table scraps, even mice/insects in the house, as all of these things have iodine in them! The nice thing about this option, however, is that you do not need to give your cat any medication to treat their thyroid disease.

There are other, more specialized options, as well. There is a treatment with radioactive iodine called I-131 that can be done at a referral hospital. This is a permanent option where a radioactive substance is injected into the cat which seeks out and suppresses the overactive thyroid tissue. Because it is non-reversible, most facilities that do this procedure will require an

extensive workup to make sure there are no pre-existing health issues. This will likely include complete labwork, radiographs, and an ultrasound of the heart.

How is hyperthyroidism monitored?

About 1-2 months after starting treatment for hyperthyroidism, we will recommend rechecking labwork. This includes a T4 as well as a small chemistry panel that includes kidney values. It is important to note that in some cats, treating the overactive thyroid hormone level can unmask underlying kidney disease. Because of this we want to make sure the kidneys and thyroid level are in a good balance. If the labwork looks good we will maintain the current treatment plan, and generally check full labwork yearly, or sooner if there are any concerns.

In Summary

Hyperthyroidism is a very common and treatable endocrine disease generally seen in older cats. There are a variety of effective options available to treat it. Once treated it is important to monitor these cats to make sure that their other organ values are stable, but generally these patients do very well.