



Hyperthyroidism – What is it?

The thyroid gland is located in the neck, close to the trachea (windpipe). This gland produces thyroid hormone, which is carried in the blood to every cell in the body. Thyroid hormone controls the rate at which cells function: too much thyroid hormone makes cells work very fast, and too little causes cell function to slow down.

Excess thyroid function (*hyperthyroidism*) is one of the most common diseases diagnosed in cats as they get older. Cats can respond to hyperthyroidism differently, meaning that signs of the disease vary from cat to cat. Common things that owners notice in their cats are weight loss, increased hunger and thirst, patchy hair loss, or failure to groom (some cats have been observed to pull their hair out), and increased urination. Some cats are hyperactive and some persistently restless or nervous. Vomiting and diarrhoea (some cats produce unusually large amounts of stool) may also occur.

Less commonly, owners might notice that their cats are panting, listless, having difficulty breathing, eating little, behaving oddly, or seeking cool places.

It is not known exactly why cats develop hyperthyroidism. A small number (about 2 – 3%) of hyperthyroid cats have a malignant (cancerous) thyroid tumour; but in the remainder, the disease is benign (it does not spread elsewhere). Diagnosing hyperthyroidism is relatively easy as most cats have too much thyroid hormone (thyroxine or 'T₄') in their blood, and this can be confirmed with a blood test.

Hyperthyroidism – how can we treat it?

Four common treatments are available for managing hyperthyroidism in cats, each with advantages and disadvantages. Hyperthyroid cats that are not treated tend to deteriorate, whereas treatment will usually either return your cat to a reasonable state of health, or may cure your cat completely.

Medication

One treatment option is the use of an medication called carbimazole (pill) or methimazole (transdermal) that works by preventing the thyroid gland from producing thyroid hormone. The drug is readily available and not very expensive but, of course, cats are not always the best pill takers! Side effects from the pills ---- although rare ---- include vomiting, rashes, loss of appetite and sometimes blood abnormalities.

Nutrition

An alternative medical option is to feed cats a special diet (Hill's Y/D) that is very low in iodine so that thyroid hormones (which incorporate this element) cannot be made. The problem with this treatment is that if your cat eats anything else; a small table scrap, a mouse or another cat's food the diet treatment will not be effective.



Surgery

Surgery can be done to remove the abnormal thyroid gland. Surgery is not difficult, does not require fancy equipment, resolves the hyperthyroidism quickly, and can cure your cat permanently. The problems with surgery are that it does require anaesthesia and many hyperthyroid cats are older cats with other problems that could complicate the anaesthesia. Like any treatment, surgery is not always successful, in particular if only one thyroid gland is removed, often surgery has to be repeated months to years later because there are two glands and both are generally abnormal. Sometimes the thyroid gland is in an unusual place and cannot be easily reached surgically.

Radioactive Iodine

The fourth treatment option is the use of radioactive iodine. Iodine is used to make thyroid hormone. Iodine that is radioactive will destroy abnormal thyroid cells. This is an extremely effective treatment (about 95% of cats respond to a single injection) that resolves the hyperthyroidism quickly and painlessly. Only a few veterinary centres are able to offer this type of treatment but we can arrange referral if desired.

If you believe that your cat is displaying any of the symptoms discussed, arrange an appointment to see a veterinarian today.

