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FELINE HYPERTHYROIDISM

Feline hyperthyroidism is very common and is characterized by an increase in the size and function of the thyroid gland. It is usually seen in older cats, but cats as young as 2 years of age have been diagnosed with the disease. Cats with this disease will frequently have weight loss and may have an increased appetite. They may have an increased level of activity that is greater than expected for an older cat. Vomiting and other GI signs are also red flags. Some cats, especially early in the course of the disease, may present with none, very few or other less typical signs. If a cat shows one of the many signs of this disease, testing for it is warranted. Because it is so common, we recommend routinely testing cats once they move into their senior years. The earlier we can diagnose the problem, the better we can manage it.

Sometimes we may be suspicious of thyroid disease, but it doesn't show up on the blood work. If cats are sick with other things in addition to their thyroid problem, they can be hard to figure out. If we think that your cat is showing signs of hyperthyroidism and its blood tests are inconclusive, we may suggest a second test or a different test that will "trick" the thyroid into revealing itself.

Hyperthyroidism is a very treatable disease and depending on a cat's circumstances, even curable. Having thyroid levels that are too high just feels crummy. Hypertension and other problems can develop that erode a cat's quality of life. Left untreated, the cat will ultimately become toxic from a high level of circulating thyroid hormone and be in a life-threatening situation. It can take many months of being uncomfortable to get to this point. It is just not an option to leave it untreated.

The initial treatment usually involves the use of medication to try to decrease thyroid hormone production by the body. Medication is normally given twice a day. If a cat is less than 15 and looks good after being on the oral medicine for about 1 month, we'll talk about whether radiation looks like a good option. If it isn't, then a kitty will need to stay on medicine indefinitely. Most cats will tolerate the medication, but about 20% will have side effects from it. The side effects most commonly range from GI upset and general malaise to skin problems, blood cell alteration and rarely, liver damage. Because of the potential for side effects, medical therapy must include rechecks of physicals and blood work regularly.

Radiation is the only treatment that can truly cure a cat with hyperthyroidism. It affects the diseased portion of the thyroid while leaving the unaffected tissue alone. That means that there's almost always no further need for medication after radiation. If a cat's kidneys look good after we start the oral medicine and everything else looks good, it is the preferred method of treatment. It's the safest too and the one with the fewest complications. But it is also a bigger one-time expense. For this procedure, a cat is very comfortably hospitalized at a special radiation treatment facility for 3 - 5 days. It is a very quiet and calm area and cats tolerate it very well. After treatment, there will be a couple of rechecks of thyroid and kidney function in the first few months.

These treatment choices may sound daunting at first. But remember that hyperthyroidism is a treatable disease. After treatment with radiation, we can cure most of the cases with a low incidence of complications. Giving medicine may not cure the disease, but it can certainly manage it and most cats do great with it. We will help you develop a treatment plan that will accommodate both you and your cat.