

## **Feline Asthma**

Feline Asthma affects hundreds of thousands of cats in the United States, it is the most common of all feline respiratory diseases. Feline Asthma is responsible for chronic and acute attacks of labored breathing, chest constriction, wheezing and coughing. Asthma is an incurable condition, but can be managed. Advances in research about the causes of asthma and the methods used to deliver the medications necessary for its treatments are making significant, even revolutionary progress.

Asthma is described as the “mechanical constriction” of the airways, or bronchi, the tubes that lead directly from the trachea to the lungs. The narrowing of the airways occurs when a cat's immune system over-reacts to the presence of an allergy-producing substance (allergen) and responds by releasing stimulants that cause inflammation and swelling of the mucous membrane lining the bronchi.

Some of the most common asthma causing allergens are dusty cat litter; vapors from household cleaning solutions and aerosol sprays; tobacco smoke; pollen from trees, weeds and grass; mold and mildew; dust mites; smoke from fireplaces, candles and even some foods, although food allergies most frequently manifest themselves in skin or gastrointestinal problems.

Young and old cats alike seem to be similarly predisposed to asthma. Males and females also appear to be equally at risk. Genetics could possibly play a role, However, outdoor cats are more likely than indoor cats to be asthmatic, simply because they are routinely exposed to many more potential allergens.

Common signs of bronchial distress stemming from chronic asthma are bouts of audible wheezing and recurrent retching – as if the cat is attempting to cough up a hairball. The earliest sign of an acute and perhaps life-threatening attack, however, is labored breathing (dyspnea), which may or may not be accompanied by wheezing or coughing. These symptoms may occur when the cat is at rest or doing nothing at all, or the cat could be playing then all of the sudden just stops. Breathing becomes rapid and soon the cat may try to take in air with its mouth open. The chest and abdomen move up and down abnormally, the breathing is shallow and rapid. And if you listen closely you may be able to detect a wheezing sound on expiration- as it exhales air from its lungs. If you notice this, you should get veterinary help right away.

If the dyspnea progresses, the cat's normally pink ears, lips, nose, and gums may turn blue from lack of oxygen, in which case emergency veterinary care is mandatory.

Common signs to look for in a diagnosis for chronic asthma are recurrent wheezing, coughing and dyspnea. The first diagnostic step is for the Veterinarian to do a thorough exam to try and pin point the source of any wheezing, this is made possible by using a stethoscope, which can be used to detect subtle sounds emanating from deep within a cat's body that are not otherwise audible. In the exam, the veterinarian will also attempt to rule out heart and lung problems that may cause asthma-like respiratory difficulty. Blood can be taken to see if there is an over abundance of white blood cells known as eosinophils, which are associated with the allergic response, but usually the blood work looks normal. Another step in diagnosing asthma is to do radiographs. Lastly a fecal exam should be done to rule out any parasites such as lungworms.

Treatment can be done with two different drug types- Corticosteroids and bronchodilators- These are the most effective drug choices. Corticosteroids reduce bronchial inflammation, while bronchodilators open up affected airways. However, there are drawbacks to long term use of these drugs. With extended use of corticosteroid therapy in cats, there is evidence of an elevated risk of diabetes and other conditions. For both corticosteroids and bronchodilators, pills and injections are inefficient, since they circulate systemically rather than targeting the specific respiratory system tissues involved in asthma. But as of now, these have been most effective in treating feline asthma.