



Feline Hyperthyroidism

WHAT ARE THE THYROID GLANDS?

The thyroid glands are small lobes located in the neck on either side of the trachea (windpipe). The glands produce a hormone called thyroxine (T4), which travels throughout the body to affect the overall rate of metabolism.

WHAT IS FELINE HYPERTHYROIDISM?

This is a condition in which the thyroid glands are over active and produce too much T4 (thyroid hormone). The cause is usually a benign tumor on one or both thyroid glands. The net effect of the excessive T4 is to over stimulate the rate of metabolism, thereby producing the symptoms of hyperthyroidism. This disease is frequently seen in small animal practice and is the most common endocrine (hormone related) disorder diagnosed in middle aged to old cats.

SYMPTOMS

Since T4 affects virtually all organs there are classic symptoms seen in the majority of cases. However not all cats will show every sign and approximately 10 % of cats will show opposite signs. In addition, since most affected cats are middle aged to old, many may have other medical conditions that can mask or exaggerate the symptoms. The most common symptoms are listed to the right.

Most Common Symptoms:

- Good to ravenous appetite.
- Attitude change - overactive, aggressive, and tremors.
- Weight loss.
- Hair loss / unkempt coat.
- Excessive drinking / urinating.
- Vomiting / Diarrhea.
- Vocalization.

DIAGNOSIS

A complete physical exam is essential to determine the overall health of the cat. As mentioned earlier, an unrelated disease may be present and possibly detected by a thorough exam. Often, the enlarged glands can be palpated (felt) by the veterinarian.

Blood tests to evaluate internal organ function (liver, kidney, pancreatic etc.) are necessary to rule in or out other medical problems. In addition, bone marrow function (white and red blood cells, platelets) should be examined.

Measuring the T4 level in the blood is the only way to get a definitive diagnosis. If the level is high, then therapy for hyperthyroidism is indicated. If the level is low, a repeat test may need to be done in the future.

TREATMENT

This is usually a very treatable disease. The treatment of choice in most cases is to have radiation therapy done. Administering a radioactive dose of iodine will destroy the thyroid tumors but will not harm normal thyroid tissue. This is an excellent treatment option because it eliminates the source of the excessive T4 but allows normal levels to persist. Daily medication is not needed. It also requires no anesthesia, therefore is an extremely safe procedure. 95% of cases will be cured with one round of treatment.

A second option in lieu of radioactive iodine is the daily administration of a medicine called Tapazole (Methimazole) to block the formation of thyroid hormone. The glands themselves are not affected. Most cats can be controlled with this route but serious side effects can sometimes occur and it does not cure the problem, it only controls it as long as the medication is being given.

Follow-up bloodwork is required no matter which treatment option is chosen to ensure your pet is responding well to treatment and no other complications develop.