

What to do for my cat's *overactive thyroid?*

Use this handout to learn more about what feline hyperthyroidism is and what you can do to protect your cat's health.

Hyperthyroidism is a common disorder diagnosed in cats. It is caused by over production of thyroid hormones (T3 and T4) from an enlarged thyroid gland, located in your cat's neck. The most common cause of thyroid gland enlargement is a benign (non-spreading) growth called an adenoma. The disease is occasionally caused by a malignant cancer of the thyroid gland.

Thyroid hormones effect nearly every organ in the body, so there are many symptoms and side effects of thyroid disease. Thyroid hormones help regulate normal bodily processes; in simple terms, they regulate how fast or slow the body functions. When excessive thyroid hormones are telling the body to run too fast, the metabolism speeds up, causing damage to the kidneys, heart, and other organs.

What are signs of hyperthyroidism in my cat?

The most common symptoms are:

- weight loss, despite a good appetite
- restlessness or irritability

These are non-specific symptoms that can also be present in a number of other diseases, so a comprehensive diagnostic work-up is important.

Other symptoms can include:

- unkempt fur
- vomiting
- diarrhea
- increased drinking
- increased urination
- more rapid breathing

How is hyperthyroidism diagnosed?

A physical examination is an important starting point to evaluate your pet's overall health. If changes are present on physical examination that cause your veterinarian to be concerned about hyperthyroidism, they will recommend a diagnostic work-up to test thyroid function as well as to check for concurrent disease or dysfunction of other organs.

If your cat is found to have hyperthyroidism, follow-up tests will be necessary on a regular basis to ensure medication remains at an appropriate dose so that thyroid hormone levels remain in a normal range.

- Chemistry tests to evaluate kidney, liver, and pancreatic function, as well as sugar levels
- A complete blood count to rule out blood-related conditions
- Electrolyte tests to ensure your cat is neither dehydrated nor suffering from an electrolyte imbalance
- One or more thyroid tests, which determines if the thyroid gland is producing too much thyroid hormone
- A urinalysis to rule out urinary tract infection and to evaluate the ability of the kidneys to concentrate urine

How can hyperthyroidism be managed?

There are four ways of managing feline hyperthyroidism. The specific treatment will depend on your pet's condition, the severity of the disease, your ability to medicate your cat regularly, and financial considerations.

1. **Medication** – The most common form of treatment. Medical management of hyperthyroidism is relatively safe and completely reversible (i.e. if the cat becomes mildly *hypo* – thyroid from treatment, this can be remedied simply by decreasing the dose of medication). Medical management requires regular monitoring of thyroid levels to ensure the dosage is correct. Medication is typically in pill form, which is the safest and most effective for your cat, but compounded topical medications are also available for cats that are too dangerous to pill.

It is important to follow your veterinarian's directions for medication and follow-up testing – under-dosing means the disease progresses, damaging the heart and kidneys, and over-dosing could have fatal consequences. Medication must be given on a regular schedule to be effective.

Side effects are rare, but can include vomiting, anorexia, fever, anemia, and lethargy. Notify your veterinarian if you think your cat is having a side effect.

2. **Dietary therapy** – Iodine-restricted prescription diets are available to manage feline hyperthyroidism. Dietary therapy can be effective in the right case, but it is neither effective nor safe for all cases, and your veterinarian will let you know if it is a good option for your cat. As with all prescription diets, it must be fed exclusively in order to be effective.

Prescription thyroid diets also have controlled levels of sodium, phosphorous and magnesium, which is important to maintain normal organ function in hyperthyroid cats. They also have high levels of taurine to support heart health.

3. **Radioactive iodine therapy** – This is a safe and very effective treatment for feline hyperthyroidism. The cure is permanent, meaning your cat will not require life-long medication. This therapy is generally quite expensive, and will require prolonged hospitalization at a specialty referral facility.
4. **Surgery** – Your veterinarian may recommend removal of a thyroid growth, and will discuss with you whether this is a good option for your cat. Surgery is not a common therapy for feline hyperthyroidism, because the result is irreversible, and a common complication is the removal of too much thyroid tissue, resulting in *hypo* – thyroidism, which require life-long medication.

The prognosis for feline hyperthyroidism is generally quite good as long as treatment and follow-up recommendations are followed. In rare cases where the disease is caused by a malignant tumour (cancer), the prognosis for your cat will unfortunately not be as good.

If you have any questions, please call Cascade Vet Clinic at (250) 295-0312.
Your veterinary team is ready to help!