

Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is one of the most common diseases of older cats. The majority of cats are over ten years old at the time of diagnosis, although cats as young as four have been reported. In almost all cats (98% - 99%), the disease results from a benign tumor in the thyroid gland that leads to excessive production of thyroid hormone.

Symptoms

The most common symptom of hyperthyroidism is weight loss combined with a ravenous appetite. Other signs include increased thirst and urination, vomiting, increased activity, and diarrhea. Although it is much less common, some cats will become lethargic, weak, and have a decreased appetite. Untreated hyperthyroidism can also lead to serious problems such as heart disease and high blood pressure. It is quite common for hyperthyroid cats to have a heart murmur at the time of diagnosis. Changes to the heart can be permanent and sometimes require additional medication to help the heart function normally. In the case of high blood pressure, many cats return to normal pressures during treatment.

Treatment

A diagnosis of hyperthyroidism is made by checking thyroid levels on a routine senior blood panel. The senior panel also allows us to evaluate other organs, like the kidneys and the liver, which can be affected by increased thyroid levels. There are many treatment options for hyperthyroidism:

- **Tapazole:** All hyperthyroid cats are initially started on medical management with Tapazole (Methimazole). Tapazole inhibits the synthesis of the thyroid hormone and is initially administered twice daily. Tapazole is available in a pill, a flavored chew, a liquid, or a gel that can be rubbed along the inside of the ear. After three weeks of treatment we recheck thyroid levels as well as other lab values to monitor the response to therapy. It is essential to monitor kidney values because excessive thyroid hormone can mask underlying kidney problems. Therefore, we sometimes find that after correcting the thyroid levels, we reveal signs of concurrent kidney disease. When this occurs we can tailor the Tapazole dose to be optimal for the kidneys, the thyroid gland and the cat. Cats on Tapazole require additional monitoring and blood work every three to six months.
- **Radioactive Iodine Therapy:** This is a permanent cure for hyperthyroidism and is technique commonly performed in humans. This method is only available to cats that have been treated with tapazole and have not shown signs of kidney disease. Cats that undergo this therapy have a radioactive iodine isotope injected into their body that selectively destroys the thyroid gland. This therapy is performed at specially approved facilities and the cats are required to stay in the hospital for a minimum of three to five days. One of the risks of this procedure is that some cats will end up with too little thyroid hormone and require supplementation; however, this is rare.
- **Surgical Removal of the Thyroid Gland:** Surgery is also an option, but requires general anesthesia and has an increased risk of complications, therefore, it is not a commonly used treatment method.

Whether we choose lifetime treatment with Tapazole, radioactive iodine therapy, or surgery, hyperthyroidism is a very manageable disease. With therapy and careful monitoring most cats resolve the majority of their symptoms and can live for years after the diagnosis.