



# Cat Watch



Expert information on medicine, behavior and health from a world leader in veterinary medicine

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## IN THE NEWS ...

### Free Cat Litter for a Worthy Cause

World's Best Cat Litter™ recently announced that Blind Cat Rescue & Sanctuary of St. Pauls, NC was randomly selected from a fan submission to win the first round of GiveLitter™ for the year. The shelter will receive 2012 pounds of litter that will help its hardworking staff clean up after blind cats currently looking for homes.

Each year, World's Best Cat Litter™ donates litter to shelters across the country through their GiveLitter™ charity, which allows cat enthusiasts to participate in the selection process. The company aims to make the nomination of individual shelters as easy as possible by allowing fans of World's Best Cat Litter™ to recommend deserving, local shelters through the brand's Facebook® and Twitter® accounts. The nationwide social media campaign received nominations from almost every state in the country. ♦

## The Latest on Feline Hyperthyroidism

*It's a common glandular disorder that targets the aging cat. Here's what you should know about this disease.*

Into the lives of many cats of a certain age comes a certain diagnosis: hyperthyroidism. Susan Steiner's cat was no exception. At 12 years of age, Grey's weight had diminished to a mere five pounds. Faced with the less-than-appealing choices of invasive surgery or expensive radiation treatment, she opted for a third choice: medication. Every morning and every evening, Ms. Steiner pulverized a half-tablet of methimazole, carefully mixed the powder with the most appealing canned cat food she could find, and hand fed it to her senior cat. That was 15 years ago. Changes that have since occurred in the world of hyperthyroidism might have made her choices different today.



**Age Plays Major Role.** Board certified veterinary internist Dr. Arnold Plotnick, owner of New York City's Manhattan Cat Specialists, describes hyperthyroidism as the most common glandular disorder in cats, second only to diabetes. "There is no breed or gender that is particularly susceptible to hyperthyroidism," he notes. "By far the major factor is age."

Is hyperthyroidism actually reaching unprecedented levels, or is its prevalence simply a function of more cats attaining old age and more veterinarians being aware of this disorder? According to Michael Stone, DVM, internal medicine specialist at the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, "Autopsies performed

*(continued on page 7)*

## Cat Fights: What You Should Know

*Here's how to tell when it's play and when it's not — and how you can intervene to make some peaceful changes.*

All kittens play, practicing to defend themselves by arching their backs, jumping on each other, chasing each other and maybe exchanging a few nips on the ears. "The difference between playing and fighting," says Katherine A. Houpt, VMD, the emeritus James Law Professor of Animal Behavior at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, "is that when playing, cats will take turns chasing each other. There isn't one dominant aggressor or one main victim."

In general, however, cats don't play much after 16 months of age, and males are more likely to engage in play of this kind. As for fighting, cats will fight at any age. "True fighting is usually more of a one-way process," says Dr. Houpt. "One cat will be the aggressor and

the other will be the victim. Hissing, clawing and batting with the paws are more fear directed than playful. The noisier the interaction, the more likely it's a fight and not play."

**The Causes of Conflict.** Why cats fight may surprise you. It's usually not over food; it's usually not over territory (especially in an established multi-cat household). "The most common type of aggression in a cat household is what's called re-directed," says Dr. Houpt.

Here's the typical scenario: One cat is sleeping peacefully on the couch. Your other cat is sitting on the window sill near the couch, watching the goings-on outside. A strange cat comes rambling by close to the house. The two

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For information on your cat's health, visit the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell Feline Health Center, website at [www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/](http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/).



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## SHORT TAKES

### Heart Disease in Cats

Diagnostic decision-making can sometimes present a challenge to veterinary clinicians when they are presented with an apparently healthy adult cat with a heart murmur. Murmurs can be associated with cardiac disease — though some studies have also identified benign causes of murmurs in cats. Auscultation alone will not differentiate the cause of the murmur and additional diagnostics will be required.

Feline murmurs can be inducible (upon physical provocation such as stress, fear or pain) or non-inducible (continuously present). A high percentage of cats with inducible murmurs appear to have no evidence of structural heart disease. This study ("Prevalence of echocardiographic evidence of cardiac disease in apparently healthy cats with murmurs," *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery*, 2011) studied 32 owned cats that were considered healthy based upon history and physical examination except for a heart murmur on auscultation.

The authors found that 53 percent of these apparently healthy cats evaluated for a heart murmur had echocardiographic evidence of cardiac disease. Most of these cats had left ventricular concentric hypertrophy (LVCH) with a small minority identified with degenerative mitral valve disease. The cause of the murmur could not be determined in 50 percent of the cats.

Therefore, based on this study, the presence of a murmur in an apparently healthy cat has an approximately equal chance of having a physiological cause versus being associated with cardiac disease.

### A Cure In a Can? Not So Fast ...

One recent development in the world of hyperthyroidism is the possibility of a



dietary 'fix' (see related article in this issue of *CatWatch*). In 2011, the Hill's Company (makers of 20 prescription diets for both dogs and cats, and of over-the-counter Science Diet) released a special diet designed for hyperthyroid cats, called "y/d."

The diet works by restricting the amount of iodine in the cat's diet to under 0.3 parts per million on a dry matter basis. Normal cat foods have higher iodine levels. Because y/d is so new, many veterinarians cannot yet vouch for this diet. "No publications have yet described the diet's effectiveness, so I've not yet started recommending this diet for my hyperthyroid patients. But I eagerly await additional information," explains Michael Stone, DVM, internal medicine specialist at the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

According to Ryane Englar, DVM, practitioner-in-residence and consultant at Cornell University's Feline Health Center, "The small number of patients enrolled in Hills' studies leaves additional studies to be desired," notes Dr. Englar. "Also, since palatability is so individual with cats, it remains to be seen how well patients will tolerate it, and how well y/d will work in multi-cat households."

Ned Dykes, DVM — a veterinary radiologist at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine — agrees. "The efficacy of the diet in hyperthyroid cats outside of a controlled colony needs to be studied. Since we still don't know the precise cause of the disease, we don't yet know if nutritional treatment will cure, or merely control the problem." ❖



## Fostering Kittens: An Important Job

*A strong foundation can give these adorable babies a great chance of finding a forever home. Here's how.*

Consider this: One cat and her offspring can produce a whopping 420,000 cats in just seven years. Each year, from April to November, hundreds of thousands of kittens are born — often to feral or stray moms that struggle to survive on our city streets, in the suburbs, and in rural areas across America. Without human intervention, most of these newborns will die or lead short, miserable lives. The moms that are not killed by cars, other animals, or disease, will repeatedly become pregnant, adding to the already crushing pet overpopulation problem.

**How You Can Help.** Aside from ensuring that your own cats are spayed and neutered, consider fostering a litter of homeless kittens. Sadly, many animal shelters don't have the staff or resources available to care for kittens that are ill or too young for adoption. Newborn kittens that have lost their mom must be bottle-fed around the clock and their tiny bladders and bowels must be expressed on a regular basis. Animal shelters that have kitten foster programs in place need dedicated people who are willing to welcome kittens into their home and

nurture them until they are old enough to be placed for adoption.

Ideally, place your foster family in a separate bedroom, laundry room, or bathroom, especially if you have other animals. Make sure the kittens' new digs are quiet and secure and well equipped with soft blankets or towels, a large cardboard box or cat carrier, a heating pad (put the setting on low and cover it with a towel), shallow food and water bowls, small litter boxes, scratching posts, and toys (a humble cardboard toilet paper roll, feathers or string can entertain kittens for hours). Purchase an inexpensive, grocery-store brand of cat litter. Make sure it is unscented clay litter. Young kittens tend to nibble on litter and the clumping variety can become impacted in their stomachs, causing severe illness or even death.

Kittens grow quickly, and by the time they reach two pounds (at approximately eight to nine weeks of age) they can be spayed or neutered, tested for various illnesses and receive vaccinations. Your job as a foster parent is now complete, but don't despair. After weeks of generously giving your surrogate family the love, care, and socialization skills they so

**AN IMPORTANT JOB.** Taking in a litter of needy kittens (and hopefully Mom, too) will provide numerous "feel good" rewards.

desperately needed, each kitten will be placed into a loving, permanent home.

If you are interested in giving abandoned kittens a healthy start in life, call your local humane society or animal shelter and inquire if they have a kitten foster program. ❖

### KITTEN 911

*It happens far too often: You find a lost or stray kitten. If you cannot immediately locate a veterinarian or reputable animal shelter, you can provide care yourself. Just remember the Three H's:*

**HEAT:** Immediately warm the kitten by wrapping it in a towel or placing it on a heating pad (cover the pad with a soft blanket or towel so the kitten doesn't get burned).

**HYDRATION:** It's very important that kittens receive enough fluids. Kitten Milk Replacement (KMR) is a popular formula that comes in an easy-to-mix powder variety or premixed in cans. All-meat human baby food is also a good choice. Make sure all liquids, including water, are served lukewarm. Hold the kitten upright (not cradled like a baby) and SLOWLY feed the kitten, using a small bottle or syringe. At approximately six weeks of age, kittens will begin to drink water from a bowl, so be sure to provide fresh water at all times.

**HYGIENE:** Keep a supply of baby wipes or washcloths on hand to clean the kitten and wipe up any spills or accidents. Mom cats will lick the kitten's genital area to stimulate its bodily functions. If a mom is not available, encouraging bladder and bowel movements becomes your task. Wrap a warm, wet cloth around your finger and stroke gently in a circular motion on the kitten's anal/genital area. Once the kitten is older, she'll begin to use the litter box on her own. Be sure to clean all litter boxes on a daily basis.



## Veterinary Hospice: An Option?

*It's a solution that can help both your family and your chronically ill cat. Here's what you should know.*

For many years, Katherine Goldberg, DVM, worked in veterinary critical and intensive care units. As she found herself becoming increasingly interested in the stories behind the emergencies, she was moved to make a difference for terminally ill pets. In 2010, she founded Whole Animal Veterinary Hospice Services, a practice whose mission is to provide “compassionate care in the comfort of your home.” She now spends most of her time doing just that. We spoke with Dr. Goldberg at a recent presentation in Ithaca, NY, where her practice is based.

### *What exactly is veterinary hospice?*

The word “hospice” — which has the same root as “hospitality” — originally meant a place of shelter for weary travelers. In 1969, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying* helped to jumpstart the human hospice movement, and the term “hospice” began to be used to describe specialized care for dying people. Similarly, veterinary hospice comes from a place of acceptance that additional intervention is unlikely to change the course of disease for a particular pet, and focuses on the quality, rather than the quantity of that pet’s life.

*Why did you decide to specialize in veterinary hospice care?* My 12-year old dog Griffy had terminal cancer. When his condition became unacceptable, I wanted to make his death as beautiful and meaningful as his life with me had been. We put wildflowers around his neck and took him out to his favorite field in his favorite season — wintertime. We sat there in the snow, fed him hamburgers and just hugged and held him. He passed away surrounded by people who loved him.

I realized how unfair it was that I could provide this beautiful experience for my pet just because I happened to be a veterinarian. I wanted to offer people a way to do the same for their pets. Many of us have experienced a beloved pet’s death in a clinical setting, like a veterinarian’s office. I believe the euthanasia process can be different. Specifically, it can provide a meaningful opportunity for growth and peace of mind. I’ve been fortunate to practice in Ithaca, with the resources of Cornell University’s veterinary school and hospital nearby.

### *Why seek veterinary hospice for cats?*

First, our cats are living longer. At some point, geriatric cats are a reality for most

**PRECIOUS TIME.** Veterinary hospice can focus on the quality time at the end of a beloved pet’s life — for both the cat and the owner.

owners. Second, the expanded medical options now available for pets are approaching those available for humans. While this can be great for our cats’ health, it also creates a dizzying array of options. Just because we can perform a medical procedure doesn’t necessarily mean we should.

In my practice, I emphasize the “worth it” meter — if a treatment, such as providing subcutaneous fluids or repeatedly pilling an elderly cat disrupts the bond between cat and owner, then it’s not worth it. I’m interested in that precious time between when a veterinarian says “There’s nothing more we can do” and the cat’s death. Hospice can help make the most of that time.

### *How can hospice benefit cat owners?*

A veterinary hospice provider can help oversee and navigate the many decisions and challenges that come with end-of-life care. Aside from financial issues, decision-making can involve complicated ethical questions like, “How do I feel about intensive veterinary care? Does this treatment make sense for my pet?” Then there are nuts-and-bolts questions like, “Can caregivers manage pain control at home? How often does a veterinarian realistically need to see this patient?”

Other factors include the cat’s underlying medical conditions, his or her temperament, and how well-tolerated various treatments might be. Veterinary professionals are often conflicted about sending cats with real nursing care needs and medical challenges back home. All too often, people choose immediate euthanasia because they don’t know of any other options.

A hospice provider can help assess your cat’s quality of life, control your cat’s pain and adjust medications according to her condition. We can offer mental and appetite stimulation, enhance mobility, and when appropriate, provide a meaningful euthanasia experience. Hospice care incorporates a global look at each cat’s situation, and a deep respect for the cat/owner bond. Often this involves sifting through piles of medical records, determining what the caregivers want, and what the patient needs. I have immense respect for the relationships that people

## MORE INFORMATION

### **Veterinary Hospice Literature:**

Kindred Spirit, Kindred Care: Making Health Decisions On Behalf of Our Animal Companions, by Shannon Fujimoto Nakaya.

Canine and Feline Geriatric Oncology: Honoring the Human-Animal Bond, by Alice Villalobos.

### **Veterinary Hospice Providers:**

Whole Animal Veterinary Hospice Services ([www.wholeanimalvet.com](http://www.wholeanimalvet.com)) reviews records and provides consultations for clients both near and far, often in conjunction with primary care veterinarians. In-home consultations are available for local clients. Ithaca, NY, 14853. Phone: 607-273-2200.

Pawspice ([www.pawspice.com](http://www.pawspice.com)), an end-of-life pet hospice care program founded by Alice Villalobos, DVM, provides palliative and nutritional care for terminal pets. P.O. Box 332, Hermosa Beach, CA, 90254. Phone: 562-493-5025.

Kindred Spirit Kindred Care, LLC ([www.kindredspiritkindredcare.com](http://www.kindredspiritkindredcare.com)), founded by Shannon Fujimoto Nakaya, DVM, provides home-based integrative veterinary care for pets with special needs. P.O. Box 4955, Kailua Kona, HI, 96745. Phone: 808-896-1543.

have with their regular veterinarians, and for the specialists that provide cutting-edge care. I advocate for a team approach where all parties work together to create a continuum of thorough, individualized, dignified end-of-life care.

Cat owners benefit most when they are part of that decision-making and caregiving team, when their cat's needs are being met, when they are supported in their grief, and when they have choices as to how, when, and with whom their cat spends her final days. It makes it all worthwhile when a client thanks me for advocating for their pet's welfare, and for their beliefs, expectations and goals.

**When should cat owners seek hospice care?** You may be ready to seek hospice

care if or when additional medical intervention is intolerable for you or your cat; when your cat's quality of life has declined to a point that is unacceptable for either of you; when your cat's pain cannot be adequately managed; and when you as a caregiver need support. Some people simply need more consultation time than the traditional model of veterinary care allows. And some veterinarians feel out of their comfort zone with these issues and are happy to be able to offer their clients a referral.

**When might a cat be ready for hospice care?** Conditions that may be appropriate for hospice care include cancer, organ failure (such as kidney failure in cats), or the end stage of any disease. Geriatric cats with multiple non-terminal issues, such as mobility and cognition, may also benefit from hospice care. Think about what constitutes a good day for your cat, and what your cat needs to be happy. When those things are no longer possible, your cat may benefit from hospice care. Finally, think about how you'd most like to say goodbye to your cat. Veterinary hospice can help your vision happen.

**Any memorable feline cases?** I do have a real soft spot for skinny, grumpy, geriatric cats — the grumpier the better! One such 18-year-old cat came to us with chronic renal disease. She hated car rides, hated her renal diet, hated receiving subcutaneous fluids ... she hated everything! After several attempts at hospital care, and several phone and in-person consultations, we elected to euthanize this cat at home, surrounded by family. Her caregivers felt great relief that she didn't suffer, nor continue to get stressed out by additional interventions.

Another very different case was an eight-year-old cat with severe renal and dental disease. His breath was terrible, his blood work was atrocious, and he had stopped eating entirely. Yet he was still bright, alert, and interactive. After considering euthanasia, we decided to pursue dental treatment instead.

His owner and I had a heart-to-heart talk about the very significant risks of anesthesia. I felt that living with a painful, infected mouth was unacceptable, and that neither cat nor caregiver was ready for euthanasia. One blood transfusion and seven dental extractions later, this cat awoke and immediately began to eat! Currently, he's doing just fine. ❖

## ACUPUNCTURE FOR OUR PETS

Three or four decades ago, few cat owners or veterinary practitioners in the U.S. knew anything about acupuncture. Today, thousands of veterinarians throughout the nation routinely practice acupuncture in their clinics, and countless cats are benefiting from it. "I'm certainly an acupuncture advocate," says Andrea Looney, DVM, a senior lecturer in anesthesiology at the Cornell University Hospital for Animals. "I use it in treating between 10 and 20 percent of my patients." Dr. Looney stresses that she relies on acupuncture as a complementary technique — using it in conjunction with the standard practices of Western veterinary medicine.

Acupuncture is regarded by some to be effective in stimulating an animal's body to resist or overcome disease and its accompanying pain and other clinical signs by correcting an imbalance of chi (pronounced chee), the word used to describe the energy flowing through many channels (meridians) that run through the body.

"I use acupuncture for chronic pain more than anything else," says Dr. Looney, "and osteoarthritis is probably the disease that's most often the cause of the pain. But I've also used it to treat problems like chronic vomiting and diarrhea, and even to stimulate an animal's appetite." Other conditions include skin conditions, respiratory distress and reproductive problems. However, some conditions — infectious diseases, for example — tend to be unresponsive to acupuncture treatment.

Dr. Looney urges cat owners to consider acupuncture as a potential treatment, especially for pets whose physical problems have been resistant to conventional care. She advises that owners seek out properly certified veterinary acupuncturists — those who have been appropriately trained in the technique and have been certified by a respected organization. ❖

## CAT FIGHTS .... (continued from cover)

cats — one inside, one outside — stare at each other. The cat outside, seeing that your cat cannot reach him, dares to approach the house even closer.

Your cat gets furious, maybe jumps at the window but can't do anything to thwart that daredevil glaring at him from outside. In his anger and frustration, your cat finds the next best cat to attack — the innocent, sleepy kitty on the couch. What follows next can become a pattern if you don't intervene. The cat that attacked becomes the aggressor; the other who was attacked becomes the fearful victim. This can really be reinforced if the attacker repeatedly spies that intrusive cat outside.

Another reason cats fight is over their favorite place to sleep, says Dr. Houpt. If one cat finds another in her napping spot, she might attack to get her spot back. "This kind of aggression is more status related," says Dr. Houpt. "It's like your cat saying, 'This is my spot,' which is different than true territorial aggression which signifies 'I want you out of this house altogether.'"

Territorial aggression occurs most commonly when another cat is introduced into the household. "But it's not always the newly adopted cat who get picked on," says Dr. Houpt. "Sometimes it's the other way around. You can usually tell who the aggressor is: one of the cats — either the adopted one or the original cat(s) in the household will seek out the other and fight with it."

Cat fights are also triggered when something changes about the cat, especially its scent, says Dr. Houpt. This can happen by bathing a cat, taking a cat to the veterinarian, or taking your feline to a cat show. "If one cat gets outside, the other cat at home may attack it because the cat has picked up some strange odors."

**Stopping Attacks.** Luckily, many cats stop short of fighting on their own. One cat will swallow its pride, walk away and let the other cat be the reining feline in the house. But when there is a lot of fighting that renders one cat fearful — or there's the possibility of injury — you should stop the fight. Here are some tips to stop fights and prevent them:

If your cats are really going at it, use distraction as a means of stopping the fight. Make a loud noise or spray them with a water bottle, if necessary. Don't physically try to separate them, because

## OTHER FACTORS THAT CAN IMPACT FIGHTING (OR NOT)

*You can actually use food to "settle disputes" between two cats that have been fighting. Here's how: First, separate the cats for at least a week. After they're calm, start your cats eating meals at the same time instead of letting them eat by themselves. This way, each cat is rewarded in each other's presence with food.*

*"At the beginning of this process," says Dr. Houpt, "leash and tether the aggressive cat so it can't attack the victimized cat." Right away, they'll both realize that the inevitable attack isn't going to occur. Start by feeding your cats at the same time — but at opposite ends of the room. If they remain calm, move the dishes a little closer the next time. Gradually continue this until the cats are eating side-by-side. They should begin to actually enjoy each other's company because they know they'll be breaking bread together.*

*"Interestingly, cats rarely fight over food the way dogs usually do," says Dr. Houpt. Although cats are usually solitary eaters, "sometime in their early socialization with humans, they may have evolved a strategy to get used to sharing food."*

**Two's Company; Three's a Fight.** *The more cats you have, the more likely there is to be fighting. Cats are generally solitary creatures except when it comes to mating and kitten-raising. So living together in close quarters is a challenge to their natural socialization habits.*

*"It's not normal for cats to live in high concentrations in the house," says Dr. Houpt. Although some people may think fighting is natural among felines, "you should stop it so that no one gets hurt. If you don't, the victim may get more frightened and be more likely to run when it sees the aggressor. And the aggressor will be more likely to chase the victim, resulting in a vicious circle. And that will allow the fighting to continue or even escalate. So separate fighting cats, and then gradually re-introduce them in a calmer atmosphere," says Dr. Houpt.*



you could get badly clawed yourself.

If fights continue between two particular cats, you may need to separate them for a week, keeping them in different areas of the house. Then slowly reintroduce them.

Exchange your cats' scents so they will seem more familiar with each other, especially when introducing a new cat into the home or if your cat has picked up a strange odor from the outside. "Take a cloth and rub each cat on the cheeks and top side of the tail where the scent glands are located," says Dr. Houpt. This helps mingle their scents, and they

should feel less threatened by each other.

For re-directed aggression, try to prevent strange cats coming into view outside your window. This is, of course, difficult to do. One suggestion: "Use window wallpaper on the glass," says Dr. Houpt, "which prevents people from looking in — or your cat from looking out. Place it at the bottom of your window, so that light can still come in."

If all else fails, your veterinarian may prescribe medication for both cats — to decrease aggression in the attacker and to decrease fear in the victim. ❖

## FELINE HYPERTHYROIDISM ...

(continued from cover)

prior to the 1970s documented normal thyroid glands in cats, so it's probably a little of both."

"In the past, when it pet cats rarely lived past age ten, they didn't have a chance to develop hyperthyroidism," notes Dr. Plotnick. "Also, hyperthyroidism was only discovered in 1979, so it's now diagnosed more frequently. We're seeing more hyperthyroidism than we did ten years ago — although it seems that for the past five years, it's been at roughly the same high level."

Ryane Englar, DVM, practitioner-in-residence and consultant at Cornell University's Feline Health Center, believes that today's emphasis on preventative medicine and obtaining baseline health data are rapidly becoming standard parts of an aging kitty's wellness visits. "It's not uncommon to unearth a diagnosis like hyperthyroidism far more readily than by waiting for owners to perceive clinical signs on their own," she notes.

Dr. Stone recalls his first case in 1984 — a physician and his cat that fortuitously arrived soon after Dr. Stone had first read about hyperthyroidism. They had been to two different veterinarians seeking a diagnosis of why the cat was eating excessively, yet losing weight. "The owner was happily surprised to get a quick diagnosis! Since then, I've probably treated over 100 cases of hyperthyroidism," says Dr. Stone.

**Causes of Hyperthyroidism.** Potential risk factors suspected of contributing to hyperthyroidism include certain canned cat foods, particularly those with pop-top lids, excessive iodine levels in commercial cat foods, and the fire-retardant chemicals known as PBDEs.

"While all may be contributing factors, the bottom line is that no one knows why cats develop hyperthyroidism," says Dr. Plotnick, adding, "Indoor cats may be more susceptible to hyperthyroidism due to their greater exposure to these indoor environmental factors." "There are more cases around the East and West Coasts than in other parts of the country; this suggests an environmental influence," notes Dr. Stone. "Hyperthyroidism is probably caused or shaped by many factors, including the environment, diet, genetics, and a multitude of variables we have yet to identify," says Dr. Englar.

**"Cats on Coffee" Symptoms.** The "classic" hyperthyroid cat often has one or more of the following signs: weight loss despite good appetite, heightened activity levels, increased vomiting, cardiac disturbances, altered vocalization, thirst, excessive urination, rapid heart rate and high blood pressure. "The cat's body is sped up by high thyroid hormone levels; essentially making the cat look and feel like it's had too much caffeine," says Dr. Stone. "Diagnosis, made by a combination of clinical signs and testing, is fairly straightforward."

"Veterinarians should be able to first feel the cat's neck and tell whether the thyroid glands are enlarged," says Dr. Plotnick. "Ordinarily, these glands are too small to feel. If you can feel them at all, they're too big!" Further diagnosis involves a simple blood test to measure the level of thyroid hormone, called T4. The "free T4" — an even more precise test — can confirm the diagnosis in cases where hyperthyroidism is suspected, but the T4 is within the high end of the reference range.

### Treatment Options: The Big Three.

Three standard treatment options for hyperthyroidism have long been available to cat owners — medication to control the raging thyroid hormones, surgery to remove the hyperactive thyroid glands, or radiation to inactivate these glands. "There has been some recent exploration into alternative treatments such as percutaneous ethanol injections and radiofrequency heat ablations; more research is needed to determine the efficacy and safety of these treatments," says Dr. Englar.

"Oral treatment is classically through methimazole (brand name Tapazole®), which interferes with iodine incorporation," she explains. "Because iodine is essential for the production of thyroid hormone, this medication this works to "slow" the thyroid, thereby producing less T4 hormone and fewer clinical signs." Unfortunately, cats need to be on the drugs for the rest of their lives, and nearly half of such treated cats experience side effects.

"It's now possible to apply a gel to the inside of the cat's ear; the medication is then absorbed through the skin, rather than having to pill the cat. Medication can also be compounded into a liquid form," notes Dr. Plotnick. "While these medications are fairly inexpensive, the time, energy and costs involved in administering medications twice a day for the

duration of your cat's life can certainly add up, particularly if your cat is diagnosed at a fairly young age. Going the medication route may make more sense for geriatric cats."

Surgery to remove the affected thyroid gland is becoming rarer, says Dr. Plotnick. "With the advent of radioactive iodine treatment, there is little point in doing surgery, since removing the thyroid glands is an invasive procedure that requires anesthetization, and may still leave behind pieces of ectopic thyroid that can still secrete excessive thyroid hormone, resulting in a recurrence." Surgery also can easily damage the parathyroid glands in the process — glands which are vital for regulating blood calcium levels. "In such cases, there is a risk of post-operative hypocalcemia, which can be fatal if untreated," says Dr. Englar.

One shot of radioactive iodine administered under the skin to inactivate over-productive thyroid cells is considered the "Cadillac" treatment for hyperthyroidism, says Dr. Plotnick, adding, "The vast majority of hyperthyroid cats only need one dose. It's non-invasive, and in most cases, completely curative." Dr. Stone agrees, "It's safe and easy, and in a perfect world, all cases would be treated this way." Obstacles include the lack of available treatment centers, a hospital stay of several days and a fairly high cost of approximately \$1,500 (about the same price as surgery). Additionally, cats with certain secondary medical conditions wouldn't necessarily be considered good candidates.

Ned Dykes, a veterinary radiologist at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University, recalls that when he began treating cats with radioactive iodine some 20 years ago, regulations required that they be quarantined — sometimes for weeks — until their urine had the same radiation output "as tap water." Fortunately, New York State recently changed its rules on radiation exposure, allowing three-to five-day quarantines for pets if there are no children or pregnant women in their household. Some veterinarians and cat owners recommend reducing quarantine times further, in the belief that older cats — some of whom have never spent a night away from home-would undoubtedly recover faster in familiar surroundings. Depending on the people comprising the cat's household, says Dr. Dykes, releasing cats immediately can be appropriate. ❖



Please send your behavior and health questions to: "Ask Elizabeth" CatWatch, Box 13, Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, Ithaca, New York 14853-6401

We regret that we cannot respond to individual inquiries about feline health matters.

Elizabeth is thankful for the assistance of **Ryane Englar, DVM**, a veterinary consultant at the Cornell Feline Health Center, in answering your questions.



**Q** Dear Elizabeth: I'm hoping that you can help me solve a very frustrating problem. My cat Jessica is a six-year-old Siamese. Her skin has become very dry and flakey, and I think it must be very itchy. She's constantly scratching at herself, sometimes so roughly that little clumps of her coat fall out. I haven't taken her to see a veterinarian yet, but a neighbor told me that I should be giving Jessica omega-3 supplements. But omega-3 comes from fish oil, and I think that Jessica is allergic to fish, so I'm afraid to do that. Are there any other sources of omega-3? What other ingredients in her food could be making her so uncomfortable?

**A** Based on what you have described, it's clear to me that you must seek veterinary medical attention for Jessica without delay. How long has this skin problem been going on? Has it been bothering Jessica for the past month or two? Or have you been observing it for a year or more? Timing plays an important role in helping to determine the source of her discomfort!

It's quite possible that Jessica is allergic to fish. But this could be a sign that she's especially sensitive and might be prone to harbor other food allergies, as well. Or she might have concurrent environmental allergies to such irritants as dust mites, molds and mildews. In humans, these allergies tend to manifest themselves in sniffing and sneezing, but in cats and dogs, they are likely to cause itchy skin. It's also possible that Jessica may have developed an allergy to flea saliva, in which case a single bite from a flea that occurred weeks or months ago can set off a chain reaction leading to these signs.

But perhaps the main reason for having Jessica evaluated is that a skin issue can also be the external manifestation of a serious internal ailment. For instance, middle-aged or older cats that develop an overproduction of thyroid hormone (hyperthyroidism) or a decreased ability to produce or use insulin (diabetes mellitus) will often exhibit the clinical signs that Jessica is showing. Both conditions are treatable, but any delay in addressing them can be very risky.

In my opinion, your neighbor's recommendation that Jessica be given a daily dose of omega-3 as a dietary supplement does have merit,

and your veterinarian is likely to agree. Among other things, this so-called essential fatty acid encourages the maintenance of a cat's healthy skin and fur. Cats are unable to produce it in sufficient quantity, so it must be obtained either in the food they eat or in daily doses of a dietary supplement. If it turns out that Jessica is indeed allergic to fish — which is a rich source of omega-3 — she may have to be given a specially formulated, vegetable-based type of supplement that does not use fish oil as an ingredient.

These substances seem to reduce joint inflammation that leads to arthritis and are thought to slow the progression of various cancers. However, I urge you to seek medical attention for Jessica prior to adding any nutritional supplements to her diet. You'll want to make sure that no systemic illness needs to be addressed first; and if your veterinarian does recommend giving her a daily supplement, you'll want to discuss which ones, and the proper daily amount.

The veterinarian will begin with a complete physical exam, possibly beginning with baseline bloodwork to rule out any serious systemic disorders. The focus of the exam will then shift to Jessica's skin, with the veterinarian performing a variety of tests and other procedures aimed toward ruling out parasitic, bacterial or fungal infections and other frequent causes of skin problems. If a food allergy is suspected, you may be asked to prepare a "novel diet," in which proteins and carbohydrates that Jessica has habitually consumed are totally removed from her daily and are replaced by, for example, chicken or potatoes. For two months or so, Jessica will consume nothing but water and the foods in this novel diet. If her allergic signs eventually disappear, you can conclude that the cause of her skin problems has been one of the foods that you have withdrawn.

At that point, you may be asked to reintroduce the withdrawn foods, one by one, and see what happens. If the allergy signs suddenly recur after she ingests one of these ingredients, there's a good chance you've identified the offending substance. From then on, of course, you'll be sure never again to include that ingredient in Jessica's food. Most important, however, is that you take Jessica in for a thorough veterinary exam without delay! *Love, Elizabeth* ❖

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