Feline Asthma: A Cause of Coughing in Cats

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Asthma is one of the most common respiratory diseases of the cat. Feline asthma is a disease that is described as involving hyperreactivity, inflammation, and airflow obstruction of the airways. The symptoms will generally spontaneously reverse or respond to treatment. In other words, one of the characteristics of feline asthma is that it comes and goes and is treatable. This article will explore the cause, symptoms, and treatment of feline asthma, which appears to be very similar to asthma in people.

Which cats are at risk for feline asthma?

Cats between the ages of two and eight years are the most likely to develop asthma. Female cats are twice as likely to get it as male cats. Siamese and Himalayan breeds appear to get asthma more frequently than other breeds. It can occur any time of the year and there does not appear to be an increased incidence in any one season, although individual cats may have more severe symptoms at certain times of the year. It is estimated that less than one percent of all cats will ever develop feline asthma.

What are the symptoms of feline asthma?

The most common symptom is coughing. The symptoms vary widely in severity and range from an occasional episode of coughing and wheezing to chronic and persistent coughing and wheezing. Cats often stand with their head stretched forward while they cough. Sometimes it may appear that they are coughing something up. In more severe attacks, the cat may suffer from acute respiratory distress and open mouth breathing. In cases where the coughing is severe, the cat may vomit after coughing spells.

What causes feline asthma?

There appears to be several different factors that may be involved in the development of feline asthma. Studies are currently being done to help further pinpoint the exact cause. It is felt that cats with feline asthma have a chronic inflammation of the tissues that line the bronchial walls in the lungs. The tissues may hyperreact to certain allergens, viruses, or infections, causing inflammation and increased mucous secretion. The increase in inflammation and secretions causes a decrease in the size of the airways and the symptoms worsen as a result. Allergens and other triggers that have been linked to an increase in symptoms of asthmatic cats include smoke, insect and hair sprays, dust (flea powders, litter, carpet fresheners), feather pillows, perfumes, and Christmas trees. Other studies have shown that ragweed pollen may cause attacks. In addition, some cats may have asthma attacks in response to food allergies, particularly fish-based foods that may be higher in natural histamines. Bacterial infections, mycoplasma, and viruses may also contribute to attacks of feline asthma.

How is feline asthma diagnosed?

Asthma is diagnosed through a combination of presenting symptoms, chest x-rays, ruling out other causes of coughing, and response to treatment. The chest x-rays can show inflammation of the bronchioles in the lungs and other changes indicative of feline asthma. Because there are many other diseases that can cause similar symptoms, a complete diagnostic workup is usually performed. Tests often include a blood count and chemistry profile in addition to a heartworm check and tests to determine the presence of other parasites, such as lungworms. Occasionally, a bacterial or mycoplasma culture is also performed.

How is feline asthma treated?

The goal of treatment is to control secretions, improve airflow, and reduce the symptoms. Cats with mild disease and only occasional symptoms are often treated with weight reduction, avoidance of allergens, and reducing the exposure to substances that may exacerbate the condition (such as cigarette smoke).

Cats that have mild symptoms on a daily basis are now being more commonly treated with medications delivered through a metered-dose inhaler. With inhalation therapy, high concentrations of drugs can be delivered directly to the lungs and systemic side effects are avoided or minimized. The inhaled medications also result in a faster elimination of symptoms than oral drugs. Albuterol is a bronchodilator that can be delivered through an inhaler. Sometimes oral bronchodilators such as theophylline or terbutaline are also used. An inhaled corticosteroid, such as fluticasone (Flovent), is often used as well. Cats with more severe disease may need oral steroids, such as prednisone for 10-14 days until symptoms are improved. A cat that is having a severe attack usually needs to be treated by a veterinarian and may require hospitalization.

The Aerokat is an inhaler specifically designed for cats. The Aerokat can deliver steroids such as fluticasone as well as bronchodilators such as albuterol. Cats may need to be adapted slowly to the inhaler. To familiarize your cat with the apparatus, position the mask portion over the nose for two seconds, without giving any medication, and then give the cat a treat. Repeat this until your cat is comfortable with the mask. At that point, you can try spraying the medication into the inhaler while the mask is placed on the cat. Your veterinarian may continue your cat on oral medications until your cat is used to the inhaler and the inhaled medication has time to reach an

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effective level in the cat's system. A prescription is needed for the medications used with the Aerokat.

Summary

Feline asthma is a respiratory condition of young and middle-aged cats. It causes wheezing and coughing of varying intensities. Allergens are the prime suspects in causing feline asthma. The diagnosis is based on history, symptoms, x-rays, and response to treatment. Asthmatic cats can generally be treated successfully.

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