Pneumonitis & Pneumonia (Lung Infections/Inflammation) in Cats

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An infection or irritation of the lungs that causes inflammation is known as pneumonitis. If fluid builds up within the lung tissue, it is called pneumonia. Pneumonia can occur as a result of an infection, aspiration of a liquid into the lung, an irritant such as smoke, trauma, or it can be secondary to another system failure, especially the heart. Infections of the lungs can be caused by bacteria, viruses, or fungi. All can be serious.

What are the symptoms?

The most frequent and noticeable symptom of a lung infection is dyspnea (difficulty breathing), especially on inhalation. The breaths will be rapid and shallow. The cat has difficulty obtaining enough oxygen as the lung tissue becomes filled with fluid, thus reducing the number of functional air spaces (alveoli). The tongue, gums, and lips may appear bluish or gray. This blue/gray appearance is termed cyanosis and is an indicator of lack of oxygen within the blood. The body temperature is usually elevated, often to over 104° Fahrenheit. If the lung congestion is caused by a failing heart, the temperature may remain within normal limits (101 to 102° Fahrenheit).

What are the risks?

Lung infections are always serious; however, with early diagnosis and treatment, most cats are successfully treated. Infection with feline leukemia virus (FeLV) or feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) can predispose a cat to developing pneumonia. Early detection and an accurate diagnosis are very important. One must rely on a veterinarian to determine if the cause of the lung condition is heart-related or simply a primary infection of the lungs.

What is the management?

If one suspects a lung disorder, a veterinarian should be contacted at once. Normally, a variety of diagnostic techniques are used, such as chest radiographs or ultrasound. If there is considerable fluid accumulation, a sample of the fluid can be removed from the chest and analyzed. This helps differentiate fungal disorders from others. If a bacterium is suspected, a culture and sensitivity test can be performed to identify the type of bacteria, and then choose the proper antibiotics. Diuretics such as Lasix (furosemide) are occasionally administered to help clear excess fluid from the lungs.

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