

Feline Asthma

Feline asthma is a relatively common ailment, affecting about 1% of cats. The disease closely resembles the same condition in humans.

What Causes Asthma

Asthma is triggered in susceptible cats by exposure to allergens or irritants. Common culprits include pollens, cigarette or fireplace smoke, various sprays, perfumes, deodorizers, carpet cleaners, and dust from cat litter. In response to exposure, the smooth muscles surrounding the airways contract, narrowing the breathing passages. The airway lining may also become inflamed and produce excessive amounts of mucus.

Signs of Asthma

The most common sign of asthma is coughing. It is often mistaken for hairballs. Other signs include difficulty breathing, wheezing, and lethargy. Cats experiencing severe episodes of asthma may pant with their mouths open.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis begins with a thorough history and a physical examination. The veterinarian may detect wheezing sounds with the stethoscope. However, additional tests are usually needed. X-rays often show characteristic signs of lung inflammation. A tracheal wash, in which cells rinsed from the airways are examined microscopically, is sometimes recommended. Tests to rule out parasites, such as heartworms, may be necessary as well.

Treatment

As in humans, asthma is a condition that is treated but not truly cured. Many cats respond well to treatment with inhaled medications administered through a face mask. Corticosteroids help to control the inflammatory response in the lungs. Bronchodilators help keep the airways open during an attack. Some cats may need both types of medications. Oral medications are also used, but may be less effective or have greater side effects. Cats whose asthma is not completely controlled with inhalant medication are often prescribed oral corticosteroids as well.

Cats experiencing a severe, acute asthma attack require emergency treatment. They should be kept quiet and handled as little as possible on the way to the veterinary hospital. Once there, they will be treated with oxygen and fast acting corticosteroids. They may also receive bronchodilators. These severe attacks can be fatal.

Preventing Attacks

It is crucial to use inhalers and other prescribed medications exactly according to instructions. In addition, reducing exposure to potential irritants is beneficial. Choose a low-dust or non-clay cat litter. Avoid smoking in the house or using the fireplace. Choose products that do not contain heavy perfumes or deodorizers. When using hair sprays or cleaning sprays, make sure the cat is out of the area first. You may wish to consider an air purifier. Keeping a log of your cats asthma episodes can help you to identify some of the triggers so that they can be avoided.