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FELINE DIABETES MELLITUS

Diabetes mellitus is a condition where there is an excessive amount of sugar (glucose) in the blood. This can be caused by an inadequate production of insulin or when the body's cells are unable to use available insulin to take glucose from the blood.

Insulin is a hormone produced and released by specialized cells in the pancreas, which permits the body's cells to take glucose from the blood and use it for their metabolism and other functions.

Type 1 diabetes (insulin dependent diabetes) occurs when the pancreas doesn't make enough insulin. Type 2 diabetes (relative insulin deficiency) occurs when the body's cells develop 'insulin resistance', meaning that they are unable to effectively use available insulin, or when the pancreas is producing some insulin, but not enough to serve the body's needs. Most diabetic cats have type 2 diabetes. However, many of them still require insulin injections for adequate control of their illness.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF DIABETES?

Diabetes is more commonly seen in middle-aged to older cats, and particularly in males. Cats that are overweight and obese are more predisposed to developing diabetes than those of a healthy body weight. This higher risk also applies to animals with underlying conditions such as advancing age, chronic or recurring medical conditions, repeated corticosteroid treatment, indoor confinement and reduced physical activity.

Common signs of diabetes in cats include:

- Increased thirst and hunger
- Increased amount and frequency of urination
- Weight loss
- Vomiting and dehydration
- Lethargic with a dull coat
- Flat footed gait in hind limbs

HOW IS DIABETES DIAGNOSED?

Diagnosis of diabetes depends on the clinical history as listed above and the finding of high blood sugar in the blood and the urine. This can be difficult in some cats as blood glucose rises when cats are stressed, as often happens with visits to the veterinarian, and with blood sampling. In these cases, multiple blood samples may be taken over a period of time.

HOW IS DIABETES TREATED?

Some cats are in a subclinical state (they have diabetes without the signs), and the presence of another disease causes them to become clinical. In these cases, diagnosis and treatment of the concurrent disease and a potential dietary change will be sufficient.

If a diabetic cat is untreated, they may develop severe illness called diabetic ketoacidosis due to derangements in metabolism. These cats can become very ill with vomiting, weakness, coma, and eventually death. Hospitalisation will be required to treat these secondary complications as well as to control the diabetes.

An otherwise healthy diabetic cat will be treated with insulin injections. These are usually given twice daily and are easy and painless to administer. The type of food you feed a diabetic cat is important, as is the timing of feeding to correspond to the action of the insulin. Your cat may be hospitalised for a few days to establish the initial insulin dose however this may be altered over the following months dependant on how well they are coping.



WHAT IS THE LONG-TERM OUTLOOK FOR MY CAT?

After being discharged from hospital, your cat will need to return for a serial glucose curve to look at the levels of blood glucose and how they change during the day. Adjustments will be made in the amount of insulin given, and sometimes in the timing of feeding.

An obese cat will be required to lose weight under the guidance of your veterinarian. Most cats will be placed onto a low carbohydrate, high protein prescription diet to assist in accurately managing their glucose levels and insulin requirements. If you are having trouble converting your cat onto this prescription diet, speak with your veterinarian about alternatives. It is important to give the prescribed amount at the prescribed time to correspond with the peak activity of the insulin injection.

Many cats live active, happy lives once their diabetes is well regulated. Since insulin requirements can change with time, sometimes even reducing to zero, diabetic cats need to be monitored closely. Watch for the return of the signs of illness, such as drinking excessively, and the level of appetite and activity. Report any changes to your veterinarian.

COULD MY CAT DEVELOP HYPOGLYCAEMIA?

If your cat receives too much insulin, blood glucose levels could become very low. Hypoglycaemia manifests as weakness and lethargy, unsteadiness, trembling, and sometimes seizures. If your pet is still alert and eating, feeding them immediately or giving a glucose or sugar solution orally will help to alleviate these signs. Never place food or liquid into the mouth of a seizing or unconscious cat as they may accidentally enter the airways. Obtain veterinary advice as soon as possible, and an adjustment in the insulin dose may be required.

This information sheet is not intended as a substitute for a veterinary consultation.

It is recommended that a consultation be arranged with a veterinary practitioner if you have any concerns with your pet's health.