

## **The problems with old age...!**

It is very easy to miss the signs of illness in animals as they get older. I frequently talk to clients who think their pet is losing weight, or not eating so much, or is not so mobile, and they often think this is part of the natural aging process when, in fact, it is a sign that the animal is suffering from an illness. Granted many of these problems are much more common in older animals but, if diagnosed, they can often be treated or helped, and this frequently gives the older pet a much better quality of life. A very common problem in the older cat is hyperthyroidism which is often missed by owners because the cat seems to be eating well, despite its other symptoms, and is often put down to being caused by old age.

It is caused by an increase in production of thyroid hormones from the thyroid glands, which are situated in the neck, and have become enlarged.



### **This cat is showing weight loss and poor coat – typical signs of hyperthyroidism**

---

Hyperthyroidism is usually seen in older cats, rarely being seen in cats less than 10 years of age. Male and female cats are affected equally.

In affected cats, a wide variety of signs usually develop, but these are usually subtle at first, and become more severe over time as the underlying disease gets worse. Also, as it is mostly older cats that are affected, some cats will have other diseases that can complicate and even mask some of the clinical signs.

### **The 'classic' signs of hyperthyroidism are:**

- [ **Weight loss**
- [ Usually a good or **increased appetite** (polyphagia)
- [ **Increased thirst** (polydipsia)
- [ Increased activity, restlessness or irritability
- [ An increased heart rate (tachycardia)
- [ A poor and unkempt hair coat

Mild to moderate diarrhoea and/or vomiting develop in some cats, and some will be noticeably intolerant of heat and seek out cooler places to sit. Some (especially advanced cases) may also pant when they are stressed, which is very unusual in cats.

If untreated the high thyroid levels will cause the heart to beat faster and faster which makes the heart become very enlarged. Eventually it may fail to work properly and fluid will start building up in the cats' chest making it difficult for it to breathe. High blood pressure leading to blindness, and kidney problems, are other complications of the illness.

If your Veterinary Surgeon suspects your cat may have hyperthyroidism he will take blood samples which usually are enough to prove it has the condition. Your pet can then be treated which is usually done, initially at least, by the administration of tablets. Different cats will need different doses of the drug so your pet will need further tests to check it is on the correct dose and is not suffering from any unseen side effects to the medication.

The tablets are not a cure, they just suppress the thyroid gland, so your cat may need life long treatment with the tablets. Alternatives are available as follows; surgery to remove the thyroid glands, low iodine diets, a gel that is applied to the ears and absorbed through the skin and lastly the application of radioactive iodine to destroy the affected glands. All these have their advantages and disadvantages and your Veterinary Surgeon can discuss these with you.

With suitable treatment most cats with this condition do remarkably well and go on to lead a much better quality of life. So if you think your cat may be suffering from this condition then consider making an appointment for it with your Veterinary Surgeon who can discuss this complex condition further with you. And remember, old age itself is not an illness, it just likes its' company!

**Jon Power BVSc cert AVP(vetGP) MRCVS; [jonpower@somertonvets.co.uk](mailto:jonpower@somertonvets.co.uk)**