

Hyperthyroid Cats - Owner Information Sheet

Please spare a few minutes to read through this important information

Hyperthyroidism – What is it?

The thyroid gland is located in the neck, close to the trachea (windpipe). The gland produces thyroid hormone, which is carried in the blood to every cell in the body. Thyroid hormone controls the rate at which cells function: too much thyroid hormone makes cells work very fast, and too little causes cell function to slow down. Excess thyroid function (*hyperthyroidism*) is one of the most common diseases diagnosed in cats as they get older.

Cats can respond to hyperthyroidism differently, meaning that signs of the disease vary from cat to cat. Common things that owners notice in their cats are weight loss, increased hunger and thirst, patchy hair loss, or failure to groom (some cats have been observed to pull their hair out), and increased urination. Some cats are hyperactive and some persistently restless or nervous. Vomiting and diarrhoea (some cats produce unusually large amounts of stool) may also occur. Less commonly, owners might notice that their cats are panting, listless, having difficulty breathing, eating little, behaving oddly, or seeking cool places.

It is not known exactly why cats develop hyperthyroidism. A small number (about 2 – 3%) of hyperthyroid cats have a malignant (cancerous) thyroid tumour; but in the remainder, the disease is benign (it does not spread elsewhere). Diagnosing hyperthyroidism is relatively easy as most cats have too much thyroid hormone (thyroxine or 'T4') in their blood, and this can be confirmed with a blood test.

Hyperthyroidism – how can we treat it?

Four common treatments are available for managing hyperthyroidism in cats, each with advantages and disadvantages. Hyperthyroid cats that are not treated tend to deteriorate, whereas treatment will usually either return your cat to a reasonable state of health, or may cure your cat completely. One treatment option is the use of an oral (pill) medication called carbimazole (Vidalta® or Neo-Mercazole®) or methimazole (Felimazole®) that works by preventing the thyroid gland from producing thyroid hormone. The drug is readily available and not very expensive but, of course, cats are not always the best pill takers! Side effects from the pills - although rare - include vomiting, rashes, loss of appetite and sometimes blood abnormalities. An alternative medical option is to feed cats a special diet (Hill's Y/D) that is very low in iodine so that thyroid hormones (which incorporate this element) cannot be made. The problem with this treatment is that if your cat eats anything else; a small table scrap, a mouse or another cat's food the diet treatment will not be effective.

Surgery can be done to remove the abnormal thyroid gland. Surgery is not difficult, does not require fancy equipment, resolves the hyperthyroidism quickly, and can cure your cat permanently. The problems with surgery are that it does require anaesthesia and many hyperthyroid cats are older cats with other problems that could complicate the anaesthesia. Also, during the surgery, glands called the parathyroid glands (which regulate the body's calcium level and so are necessary for life) could be accidentally removed or damaged. If this happens, a replacement hormone will have to be given at least temporarily.

Like any treatment, surgery is not always successful, in particular if only one thyroid gland is removed, often surgery has to be repeated months to years later because there are two glands and both are generally abnormal. Sometimes the thyroid gland is in an unusual place and cannot be easily reached surgically.

The fourth treatment option is the use of radioactive iodine. Iodine is used to make thyroid hormone. Iodine that is radioactive will destroy abnormal thyroid cells. This is an extremely effective treatment (about 95% of cats respond to a single injection) that resolves the hyperthyroidism quickly and painlessly. The iodine is injected under the skin in the scruff of the neck just like a vaccine.

The drawback is that cats then need to spend some time in a special isolation facility while they eliminate almost all of the radioactivity (in its urine and faeces) before returning home. Only a few veterinary centres are able to offer this type of treatment.

Is your cat a candidate for radioactive iodine treatment?

Most hyperthyroid cats are candidates for treatment with radioactive iodine. This is a simple checklist of requirements.

***** If you think that your cat will not fulfil any one of the following criteria, please ask your Vet to check with us as soon as possible. *****

- * Your cat must have a high thyroid hormone concentration confirmed by your Vet.
- * Your cat's general health must be good. During the time that he / she is with us, we are not able to handle him / her very much because of the radioactivity. We are not able to groom cats and, while their tablets may be placed in food, they cannot be given directly. We do not want cats to become unwell when they are with us because we cannot treat them without exposing the Vets and Nurses in the Hospital to high levels of radioactivity; therefore if your cat has significant medical problems, other than hyperthyroidism, he / she may not be suitable for this treatment.
- * Your cat must be reasonably well behaved. Many cats with hyperthyroidism can be a bit tetchy so your cat does not have to be an angel, but we cannot treat cats that will try to attack us as we care for them.
- * **We strongly recommend that a blood test be done to check kidney function when the thyroid problem is controlled with tablets or diet.** Hyperthyroidism boosts the metabolism and can hide problems such as kidney failure. The blood tests in some cases need to be done more than once, with a change in the dose of medication in between to get the thyroid hormone level right, so that the assessment of kidney function is meaningful. **The blood tests are therefore best done at least four – six weeks before your appointment with us.** Please make sure that you bring a copy of the results of any blood tests that have been done by your Vet to your appointment. If your Vet is concerned about any of the test results, they are welcome to consult with us by telephone or fax.
- * Tablets controlling thyroid hormone levels or the Y/D diet should then be stopped two weeks before your cat's appointment at the Queen Mother Hospital for Animals.
- * Your cat must be up to date with vaccinations for cat flu.

If your cat fulfils all of these criteria, he / she is probably a good candidate for treatment and we look forward to meeting you at your appointment. **Please do not feed your cat from midnight the evening before we are due to see you but fresh drinking water should be available at all times.** If you have any questions regarding the suitability of your cat for treatment, or any concerns about stopping the treatment, please contact your own Vet initially and they can call us for clarification if necessary.

Please ensure that, if you cannot keep your appointment for any reason, you call the Reception desk at the QMHA on 01707 666366 as soon as possible so that another cat from our waiting list can be treated instead.

How long will your cat have to remain in isolation?

The answer to this question is 'it depends'. All cats stay with us for a minimum of 15 days following injection of radioactive iodine.

Following this required minimum stay, you then have a choice:

Either: Your cat can stay with us for 8 more days (a total stay of 23 days) and then be discharged with no special precautions other than recommendations regarding good litter-box hygiene. The current cost of treatment is £3093.66* incl VAT.

Two weeks prior to the appointment you will be contacted to confirm and finalise instructions and will be required to pay a deposit of £500 which will be non-refundable unless, a cancellation is made two or more weeks before the appointment, your cat dies or for some reason the cat is deemed not to be suitable for treatment. This will also apply if you wish to claim direct, the deposit being refunded on receipt of payment from the insurance company.

Or: Your cat may be able to go home after only 15 days if **all** of the following conditions are met:

- Your cat will be confined indoors and will use a litter-box.
- You are able to ensure that any children in the household will remain at a safe distance from the cat and its litter-box.
- There is no-one in the household that is pregnant, or could be pregnant.
- You have a secure outside storage area (garage, shed) where soiled litter can be stored for one month before being put out for collection. If this is not possible, special litter can be purchased that can be flushed down the toilet, but your plumbing must be in good working order to do this.
- You are prepared to limit the amount of time spent in close proximity to your cat for **8 days** after he / she returns home.

The current cost of treatment is £2549.66* incl VAT.

You do not have to decide which of these options you prefer until the day of your appointment at the Queen Mother Hospital for Animals when you will have the opportunity to discuss this in greater detail with the Clinician that is treating your cat. This information is provided so that you can consider your options ahead of time and make any arrangements that may be necessary.

** prices may be subject to increase*

What to do if you have questions?

If you have questions, you should direct these to your regular (referring) Vet in the first instance. Information will have been sent by us to your Vet about our treatment protocol at the same time that this letter was sent to you. If, however, they are not able to answer your questions, they are welcome to call / fax our Internal Medicine Service for advice. Until we have actually seen you and your cat, we are not able to talk with you directly and all communication should be through your regular Vet.