



FELINE BRONCHIAL ASTHMA

Obstructive and allergic lung diseases affect many cats and are sometimes called “asthma,” “bronchitis,” or “bronchial asthma.” When the airway of the cat is sensitive to certain stimuli, exposure to these agents leads to narrowing of the airways and results in muscle spasms in the bronchi (breathing tubes), buildup of mucus, and accumulation of cellular material. The bronchi can react to a number of stimuli, such as:

- ❖ Inhaled debris or irritants - dust from cat litter, cigarette smoke, perfume or hairspray, carpet fresheners, and perfumes in laundry detergent
- ❖ Pollens or mold
- ❖ Infectious agents - viruses, bacteria
- ❖ Parasites - heartworms, lungworms

The cat is most stressed during the period of expiration (forcing air out of the lungs). The difficulty with expiration is typical with obstructive disease of the lung. Air may become effectively trapped in the lungs, causing them to overinflate. In some cases, this trapping leads to development of emphysema in the cat. In particular, the inability to clear the bronchi of material may leave the cat susceptible to secondary infections.

What are the symptoms of asthma?

Coughing and respiratory distress are the most commonly reported signs with obstructive lung disease. Coughing is a significant finding since there are relatively few causes of cough in the cat. Also, many cats assume a squatting position with the neck extending during these coughing episodes. Wheezing is easily heard with the stethoscope and is sometimes so loud that the owners can hear it. Occasionally, sneezing and vomiting are noted.

How is asthma diagnosed?

As it is often difficult to definitively diagnose with a single laboratory test, often a series of tests are done to help distinguish asthma from other diseases that may present with similar signs. Blood tests, to look for changes consistent with the disease, and chest x-rays are the mainstays in supporting a diagnosis of asthma. Fecal analysis and feline heartworm tests help rule out parasites infections whose signs may mimic those of asthma. Bronchoscopy or tracheal washes may sometimes be performed to help identify abnormal cells and/or infectious organisms.

How is asthma treated?

For many cats asthma is a lifelong problem with flare-ups occurring at various times. Some cats can be managed by simply controlling their environment; others need constant daily medication to control their disease. Many cats may only need medication periodically when signs occur. Any factors known to trigger or aggravate breathing problems should be avoided. In some cases, this may mean trying different brands of cat litter, eliminating cigarette smoke from the home, etc. **It is important to pay close attention to environmental factors that may aggravate the condition.** One or more of several medications may be used including *bronchodilators*, which open up the airway and allow the cat to move air more freely, and/or *corticosteroids*, which decrease inflammation, decrease mucus production and dilate the airway. In some cats, delivering medication via inhalers may be necessary. Emergency treatment with oxygen and other medications may be necessary for cats experiencing a particularly severe flare-up of signs.

To summarize, asthma in cats is usually an ongoing problem involving the inflammation of the airways that are overly sensitive to certain stimuli. Reducing the presence of these stimuli, if known, along with medication to counteract their effect, will often increase your cat's comfort and quality of life.