



Jennifer Evans, DVM Brassfield Animal Hospital

Dr. Jennifer Evans recently joined Brassfield Animal Hospital in May. She received her Doctorate of Veterinary Medicine from Mississippi State University in 2011. A Greensboro native and Guilford College graduate, she is excited about returning to her hometown after practicing for six years in western North Carolina.

Her primary interests include canine/feline dentistry and dermatology.

In her spare time, she enjoys

outdoor rock climbing, running marathons, and chasing after her rambunctious toddler.

What's the Skinny on Your Skinny Older Cat?

A Glance at Feline Hyperthyroidism

Regular visits to your veterinarian are essential to the health of any cat, but this becomes especially true of our older feline friends. Many vets will recommend at least annual or biannual lab work to be performed in cats older than 7-10 years of age. Kitties in this age group are at a much greater risk of developing chronic diseases such as diabetes, kidney failure, and inflammatory bowel disease, all of which are often associated with weight loss. A very common yet often lesser known chronic disease that plagues older cats is hyperthyroidism, and it frequently is the cause of a dramatic decrease in a cat's weight.

What is Hyperthyroidism?

Hyperthyroidism is caused by a growth in the thyroid gland. These growths are typically benign, with only approximately less than 3-5% being a cancerous tumor. Normal thyroid glands produce inactive thyroid hormones commonly known as T4, which is then converted by body tissues into the active form called T3. This T3 affects the metabolism of every aspect of the body. During hyperthyroidism, the growths in the thyroid glands cause an overproduction in thyroid hormones, which ultimately causes the entire body's metabolism to increase.

Signs of Hyperthyroidism

Since alterations in thyroid hormones can affect almost every body system, there are many clinical signs associated with hyperthyroidism. The hallmark sign is weight loss in a cat despite a normal to increased appetite. Other symptoms that are frequently noted include increased thirst, restlessness, hyperactivity, vocalization, vomiting, diarrhea, and occasionally aggression. Also, your veterinarian may be able to feel one or both lobes of the thyroid gland during a physical exam, which he/she would not be able to do with a normal thyroid. Hyperthyroidism also

causes hypertension (high blood pressure) in the majority of cats diagnosed, which can secondarily cause blindness. Furthermore, hyperthyroidism is linked to certain cardiac abnormalities, therefore your veterinarian may discover a murmur when listening to your cat's heart.

Diagnosis and Treatment of Hyperthyroidism

Diagnosis of hyperthyroidism is fairly straight forward most of the time, and is typically discovered on routine lab work that includes a T4 level. Fortunately for cats and their owners, hyperthyroidism can often be successfully managed, especially if diagnosed early. There are four methods in which we manage hyperthyroid patients: 1) radiotherapy, 2) surgery, 3) oral medications, and 4) diet.

Although it can sound scary, the safest and most effective treatment is radiotherapy. Hyperthyroid cats are injected with radioactive iodine just under the skin like a vaccine. This radioactive iodine has the ability to destroy the thyroid tumor without affecting the rest of the body. This method is great in that it is a non-surgical way to cure a cat of hyperthyroidism, and it is typically successful with just one injection. The downside is that this can be expensive, require the kitty to board for several days, and facilities that perform this procedure are limited.

Surgical removal of the abnormal thyroid tissue is also a permanent method to cure cats with hyperthyroidism. This procedure has fallen out of favor compared with radiotherapy as it can often be risky to anesthetize untreated hyperthyroid cats, and the surgery itself can lead to many complications. This type of treatment is usually only used if the owner wants a permanent cure and radiotherapy is not available nearby.

The most commonly utilized treatment for hyperthyroidism are oral medications. In the United States the drug methimazole is used most often. The medication is inexpensive (in the short term), highly effective, and side effects are generally uncommon. The main disadvantage to using methimazole is that it has to be given daily, often every 12 hours for the rest of the cat's life.

Lastly, there is diet from Hill's Pet Nutrition called y/d that can be effective at treating hyperthyroidism. This method is used when daily administration of oral medications is not possible or if radiotherapy is not feasible. The problem with using a diet as a treatment option is that the cat cannot have any other form of food, including treats or even a hunted bird/rodent, or it will be ineffective. Also some cats may not find the diet palatable.

The diagnosis of hyperthyroidism in your older cat can initially be quite overwhelming. Your veterinarian will be able to discuss the various treatment options available and help guide you to which treatment will be best for both you and your kitty. With appropriate therapy, a hyperthyroid cat can manage their disease very well and live out a normal life.

BRASSFIELD Animal Hospital



336-282-1800 • 3205 Brassfield Road, Greensboro

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