

My Cat Has Started Walking in Circles

CatChannel veterinary expert Arnold Plotnick, DVM, discusses idiopathic vestibular syndrome and its causes.

By Arnold Plotnick, DVM

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Q: My 3-year-old cat Peaches was out for a while this morning when I noticed him in the driveway walking in circles and falling over. I brought him in the house, calmed him down, he ate a little and then started to walk funny again. I rushed him to his vet and they say he might have eaten something. They gave him shots and are keeping him overnight. Will he be OK? I am a nervous wreck right now.

A: I'm pretty sure your cat will be OK. I suspect your cat has idiopathic vestibular syndrome.

The vestibular system is the part of the nervous system that controls balance. When the vestibular system is not working properly, cats will often show signs such as circling (to one side), falling or rolling to one side, a head tilt, and nystagmus (beating of the eyes back and forth). An inner ear infection is one common cause of vestibular disease in cats. Your vet, however, didn't detect anything wrong with the ears.

There are other causes of vestibular signs (brain tumors, encephalitis, etc). However, the sudden onset in a young cat makes me lean toward feline idiopathic vestibular syndrome. In this syndrome, the vestibular system suddenly goes haywire, for no discernable reason.

In dogs, it tends to occur in geriatric patients, but in cats, it can strike at any age. The severity can vary, with some cats being almost unable to walk at all without falling and rolling, while other cats are only mildly affected.

Fortunately, most cats show rapid improvement in the first 24 to 72 hours, and then will gradually return to almost 100 percent normal in about three weeks. Some vets have prescribed anti-nausea drugs, anti-vertigo, or anti-inflammatory medications, but it does not change the course of the disease at all. Some cats may retain a bit of a head tilt after recovery, but that's no problem; to these cats, the world looks normal despite the head tilt. Dogs show this kind of dramatic improvement as well. However, because it occurs in older dogs, people often quickly (and mistakenly) assume that the dog has had a stroke, and will often put the dog to sleep. I shudder to think of how many dogs with this benign condition have been misdiagnosed as having a stroke and were needlessly euthanized.