

On a Fixed Income, But Need Cat Diagnosis

CatChannel veterinary expert Arnold Plotnick, DVM, offers advice for diagnosing cat's illness while trying to keep costs down.

By Arnold Plotnick, DVM

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Q: I have a 10-year-old cat that goes through spells where she doesn't want to eat, and she barely drinks. My vet gives her antibiotics, which help temporarily, but in two or three months she is back to not eating or drinking. They say that her stomach gets irritated, but she is losing more and more pounds. I am on a very fixed income. What can I do to get her to eat and drink? One vet said she could be diabetic or have a thyroid problem. I don't want to lose my cat; I've had her since she was a baby and she is all I have.

A: You're in a tough situation. With the economy the way it is right now, it is not easy to budget for unexpected veterinary expenses. Unfortunately, there is no way to come up with a diagnosis and remedy the problem unless you allow your vet to run a few basic diagnostic tests. The three most common disorders that would cause weight loss in a geriatric cat would be hyperthyroidism, diabetes and chronic renal failure. Gastrointestinal cancer and inflammatory bowel disease have to be on the list as well.

The first three illnesses can be diagnosed with basic blood and urine tests. However, if money is really tight and you cannot afford a geriatric blood and urine panel, your vet should be able to do a few simple in-house tests to get an idea as to whether your cat might have one of these illnesses. The first thing that your vet can do is run a urinalysis in-house. This should be less expensive than sending the urine to a diagnostic lab. If there is sugar in the urine, your cat is diabetic. If no sugar, diabetes is unlikely.

Your vet can also run a single blood-sugar level in-house, to rule in or rule out diabetes; this is less expensive than an entire chemistry panel. Have your vet test to see how concentrated the urine is. If the urine is well-concentrated (in vetspeak: if the specific gravity is greater than 1.040), then your cat's kidneys are working fine. If the urine is dilute — specific gravity less than 1.040 — then your cat might have kidney disease, and a chemistry panel will become necessary to prove this and to determine the severity.

To diagnose hyperthyroidism, there's no way around it: you'll have to let your vet measure the level of thyroid hormone in the blood. This test has to be sent to a laboratory. However, if your vet can feel enlarged thyroid glands in your cat's neck (an experienced, skilled vet is often able to do this), a presumptive diagnosis of hyperthyroidism can be made, and treatment can be begun.

If it looks like your cat doesn't have any of these illnesses, then further diagnostics will be necessary, such as ultrasound and/or endoscopy. This will probably be cost-prohibitive. Talk to your vet about symptomatic therapy, such as you administering fluids subcutaneously (under the skin) during those periods when your cat won't eat. Have your vet or one of his technicians demonstrate how to force-feed your cat with a syringe. Also, ask him about pills that might stimulate your cat's appetite during those phases when she stops eating. Good luck with her; I know you're in a tough spot.