

What Causes Paralysis in Cats?

Arnold Plotnick, DVM, offers some possible answers.

Q: My friend recently found her cat paralyzed. The cat was responsive and could turn her head, but the rest of her body did not move. The cat was "calling out" and purred when touched. No visible signs of injury were present. Because this happened at night, there was no place to contact until morning.

We tried to get the cat to the local veterinarian the next morning. On the way there, the cat's eyes became dilated. You could see hemorrhaging in the whites of the eyes and the cat's breathing became labored. The cat stopped breathing just before we got to the vet. I tried to perform CPR on the cat, but to no avail.

A preliminary exam from the vet suggested that the cat had an embolism in her back or possibly had leukemia. From what I've read about feline leukemia, paralysis is not one of the symptoms.

My friend's cat was 3 years old and had all her required shots. What do you think caused her paralysis?

A: I agree with you that feline leukemia is unlikely to have been the cause of the cat's paralysis. The most common cause of sudden rear limb paralysis is indeed an embolism. A heart disease called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy can lead to arterial thromboembolism. In these cases, a blood clot forms in the heart, and a piece of the clot breaks off and travels down the aorta. It then gets lodged at the end of the aorta, cutting off the blood supply to the rear legs. In these instances, the front legs tend to be fine.

I can't tell if the paralysis affected just the rear legs or if all legs were affected. If all four legs were affected, then I'm reluctant to guess as to what the cause is because there aren't many conditions that would cause sudden paralysis of all four limbs in an indoor cat.

Certainly, a blood clot to the spinal cord is a possibility, although this is uncommon. Trauma to the spinal cord is also a possibility, although, again, not common in an indoor cat. A disk problem in the spine is also a possibility, but this is more common in dogs and rarely affects cats. Unfortunately, without an autopsy, I don't think we'll ever know what caused this poor cat's untimely demise.

Regards,
Arnold Plotnick, DVM