

Chronic Renal Failure (CRF) in Older Cats

Learn what it is and 4 options for increasing your cat's comfort.

By Dusty Rainbolt

If you notice your older cat drinking more water than normal, it might be a symptom of chronic renal failure. Take him to your local veterinarian for an exam.

Has your older cat been drinking a lot of water? Does he vomit occasionally? Does he have bad breath?

If you answered "yes" to any of the above questions, kidney issues might be the problem.

One of the most common kidney problems in older cats is chronic renal failure (CRF). CRF usually occurs in cats older than 10 years old. It is progressive and incurable. Because the disease involves the loss of kidney cells that are replaced with scar tissue, no treatment — whether alternative medicine or conventional — can reverse its course, says Jean Hofve, DVM, who practices holistic veterinary care in Colorado.

How CRF Works

With CRF, the kidneys don't filter properly, so toxins build up in the blood. The accumulation of toxins in the blood results in vomiting, loss of appetite and weight loss. You'll notice him drinking more water, urinating frequently and bad breath.

Unfortunately, by the time symptoms are apparent, CRF is usually well advanced. Cats' kidneys can function normally with only 30 percent capacity, so symptoms aren't seen usually until 70 percent of the kidney function has been lost. Because of this, it's vital to begin treatment whenever you notice the first symptoms.

How to Help a Cat with CRF

Although there's no cure for CRF, if you catch it early enough, hydration and proper diet can increase your cat's life span. Try these additional options to improve the quality of life for a cat with CRF.

1. Decrease phosphorus and protein.

Unlike protein, phosphorus, which meat contains in large amounts, is a real dietary offender for cats with CRF, according to a study by Colorado State University's veterinary teaching hospital. Unfortunately, "the only way to restrict phosphorus is to restrict protein. Decreasing phosphorus intake (by restricting protein) can help some cats feel better, so it may be worth a try in a symptomatic cat," Hofve says.

2. Give your cat subcutaneous fluids.

"Subcutaneous fluids help keep the toxins flushed out of the bloodstream and make the cat feel much better," Hofve says.

Because having fluids administered by your cat's clinic can be very costly, ask your vet to show you how to do it yourself. You can buy the fluid, venoset and needles from your vet. You also can purchase them at online sites, but you still will need a prescription from your vet.

3. Feed your cat with CRF a wet diet.

Because hydration for cats with CRF is crucial, dry food isn't a good choice for cats with CRF. Even healthy cats tend to become chronically dehydrated on a kibble-only diet, Hofve says. It's believed that a lifelong diet of dry food could be a contributing factor to the development of CRF in the first place. Weight-loss is the quickest killer, Hofve says, so if your cat won't eat the prescribed diet, feed him whatever he will eat and support the kidneys with fluids.

4. Try some holistic supplements.

While you must give your cat fluids, you also have some holistic options. Some holistic supplements can help relieve discomfort. Deer antler velvet has been used in Chinese medicine for more than two thousand years. Studies by B.X. Wang showed that velvet antler, called Rokujo in ancient Chinese medicine, might help treat inflammatory kidney diseases in a manner like steroid-based pharmaceuticals. Today, red deer antler is used for its anti-inflammatory and anti-aging actions.

Flower essences also might benefit cats suffering from CRF. Bach Flower Remedy Crab Apple, which is available at most health food stores, is recommended for chronic renal failure or liver disease, according to Bach Flower Remedies for

Animals by Helen Graham and Gregory Vlamis. You can place between two and eight drops in your cat's bowl of drinking water.

Hofve uses Slippery Elm to help alleviate nausea that can accompany kidney disease. It has been used to relieve bladder or kidney inflammation as well. Mix Slippery Elm bark powder with cold water until it turns into a mush. Give one-fourth teaspoon for every 10 pounds of body weight. Give it to your cat orally before meals to keep his stomach settled.

Use any or all of these tactics to enhance your CRF cat's life so that you both can enjoy and make the most of your time together.

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In March 2007's CAT FANCY:
Find out how to keep your cat's kidneys functioning properly.