

New Treatments for Feline Asthma

Recent advances in understanding the disease have helped more cats breathe with greater ease.

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"People should not smoke or apply perfume around asthmatic cats, or use dusty cat litters," Schulman said.

A diagnosis of feline asthma is usually made based on the history, physical examination findings and chest X-rays. Increased bronchial markings on an X-ray are highly suggestive of asthma. Other helpful tests include a complete blood count and a heartworm test.

"Bronchoscopy, which involves using a tiny fiberoptic camera to actually examine the inside of the lungs and collect specimens, may also be useful in some cases," Schulman said.

Treatment OptionsThe most effective long-term treatment consists of high doses of oral steroids. Steroids lessen the inflammatory response, reducing the severity of symptoms.

Steroids are given twice daily for 10 to 14 days, and then the steroid dose is tapered slowly over several months. Most newly diagnosed asthmatic cats will feel and act much better within the first two weeks. Even though cats are fairly resistant to the undesirable side effects of steroids, a few have adverse reactions, making treatment a challenge. Steroids inhibit the action of insulin. While most cats can tolerate steroids with minimal ill effects, some fall victim to the side effects.

Bronchodilators are drugs that reverse airway constriction, allowing the air passages to open. Because steroids have potential side effects, it is tempting to choose bronchodilators as the initial treatment option. Since chronic inflammation is the root of the problem, treatment of this inflammation using steroids is the cornerstone of therapy. Bronchodilators may be used as adjunct therapy. Antihistamines and another class of drugs called anti-leukotrienes have been used in asthmatic cats with varying success.

Muffy's chest X-rays and blood tests confirmed the diagnosis of asthma. Oral prednisone was prescribed. On re-examination 10 days later, Muffy's cough had disappeared, and she seemed to breathe easier during sleep.