

New Treatments for Feline Asthma

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

Arnold Plotnick, DVM

Posted: Thu Apr 1 00:00:00 PST 2004

Muffy had always been a healthy cat. For years, the diminutive, longhaired calico was a fixture on the desk of Steve Beerstein, editor of a New York newspaper. However, Beerstein noticed that Muffy's breathing seemed slightly labored, and he could hear a gentle wheeze as she napped. He wasn't concerned, though, as her appetite and activity remained normal, and she continued to act like her usual self: queen of the newsroom.

Then one day when Beerstein arrived at work, he found Muffy crouching in the corner, coughing. Neck extended, she glanced up at Beerstein with a panicked look in her eyes. Beerstein tried to comfort her, to no avail. Between coughs, Muffy's chest was heaving.

"I'd grown accustomed to the occasional sound of her coughing up a hairball," Beerstein said. "But this was clearly no hairball."

In five minutes, Beerstein was hailing a cab and heading to his vet's office. "There are several possible reasons for coughing and labored breathing in cats," his vet said. "At the top of the list, though, is asthma."

What Is Asthma?

Feline asthma is a clinical condition characterized by recurrent bouts of coughing, wheezing, and labored breathing. The condition affects "approximately one percent of the general cat population, and over five percent of Siamese cats" said Rhonda Schulman, DVM, assistant professor of small animal medicine at the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine.

Cats exhibiting these clinical signs usually behave normally between episodes. Some cats have only a brief history of coughing episodes before presented with an acute, severe respiratory compromise - the so-called "asthma attack."

Asthma is a type of allergic bronchitis. The allergen acts as an irritant, triggering a hypersensitivity reaction, and the airways respond with constriction, mucus and cough. If the environmental factors triggering the asthma can be identified and eliminated, the coughing and wheezing usually resolves. But, in most cases, no underlying allergen can be identified.