

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

However, a new problem arose. "I found myself having to refill her water bowl twice as often as before," Beerstein said. "She even began to drink water out of my drinking glass." Steve told this to his veterinarian, and a urinalysis and blood sugar measurement confirmed that Muffy had become temporarily diabetic from the steroids.

Discontinuing the steroids caused her asthma symptoms to return. Fortunately, a new treatment that has essentially no side effects is available: inhaled medications.

A New Approach Philip Padrid, DVM, associate professor at the University of Chicago, began investigating the possibility of using inhaled medications about 4 1/2 years ago. Steroids and bronchodilators can now be given effectively by inhalation to asthmatic cats.

Both types of drugs are available for humans, as metered dose inhalers (MDIs). In the human world, adults quickly learn to coordinate the inhaling of the medication. However, this is much more difficult for children and impossible for infants or cats. An alternative was developed to allow children, infants, and cats to use the MDIs without having to coordinate their breathing. A spacer - a plastic chamber roughly the size of a toilet paper tube - is attached to the MDI, and a facemask is attached to the other end. The spacer acts as a temporary storage area for the misted medication to sit, until the individual breathes it in.

"The original idea was to copy the way infants were treated," Padrid said. We then modified it when we found that it worked, but [it] was very expensive since the inhaler apparatus and mask used for humans was very inefficient, causing the drug to be wasted and increasing the expense."

Cat owners are taught to attach the MDI and the facemask to the spacer, and then to actuate the MDI twice, filling the spacer with the mist. The facemask is gently placed over the cat's mouth and nose, and the cat is allowed to inhale and exhale seven to 10 times with the mask in place.

Inhaled steroids are the most potent inhaled anti-inflammatory drugs available. Fluticasone is a steroid of large molecular size, preventing it from passing into the bloodstream when inhaled. "Inhaled steroids do not cause the unwanted side effects that the pills or injections do," Padrid said. Many cat owners find that giving inhaled steroids is faster and seems to bother the cat less, than trying to administer oral medication.