

Help Anemic Cats

An effective experimental treatment may offer hope for felines with non-regenerative anemia.

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Anemia, a reduction in the oxygen-carrying capacity of blood because of too few red blood cells in the circulation, is one of the most common health problems in cats. Red blood cells carry oxygen to the muscles and other organs. Without enough of them, cats become weak, lethargic and often have a decreased appetite. Whenever I encounter a pet with anemia, I embark on a mission to discover its cause and formulate a treatment plan. Anemia can be broadly divided into two categories: regenerative and non-regenerative.

The Two Anemias With regenerative anemia, the bone marrow recognizes the body's red blood cell deficiency and tries to replenish the blood stream by cranking more out. Regenerative anemia may result from blood loss, but more commonly, red blood cells can also be destroyed by the immune system. Non-regenerative anemia is when the bone marrow does not or cannot respond to the red blood cell deficiency. One of the most common causes of non-regenerative anemia in pets is chronic renal failure (CRF), an incurable progressive disease. Once CRF is diagnosed, veterinarians attempt to slow the progression of the disease and make the cat as comfortable as possible. Treating the anemia that accompanies CRF can significantly improve a cat's quality of life, strength, activity and appetite. The kidneys produce a hormone, erythropoietin (EPO), which tells the bone marrow to produce red blood cells. In anemic cats, the kidneys produce and release more EPO so that the bone marrow can produce more red blood cells. With CRF, the damaged kidneys cannot produce enough EPO, and cats become anemic.

As a veterinarian specializing in cats, most cases of feline non-regenerative anemia I see involve kidney failure. Other cases are a result of various chronic illnesses or infections, such as feline leukemia virus (FeLV).