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Feline idiopathic cystitis

Cystitis is a very common condition in cats. Signs you may have noticed at home include straining to urinate, increased frequency of urination, urinating in unusual places such as the bath, and spotting blood.

There are many possible causes of cystitis in cats. The most common, particularly when it first occurs in a young or middle-aged cat, is 'idiopathic cystitis' – a condition of unknown origin resulting in inflammation of the bladder lining often in association with stress. Because the bladder is inflamed, this can cause the patient to feel the urge to urinate very frequently. Treatment for this requires anti-inflammatory medication to settle down the inflammation, encouraging increased water intake, and behavioural modification to reduce any stress. Even cats that appear very laid back can be feeling stressed inside!

However, it is important to be aware that there are other potential causes of cystitis. Depending on your cat's age and history, your vet may decide to treat symptomatically at his/her first presentation. However, for recurrent cases, it is often necessary to perform some tests. A urine sample can be very valuable and may be obtained by a 'free catch' using non-absorbable litter and a collection pipette for you to obtain at home. Alternatively, a 'cystocentesis' can be performed where your vet can place a fine needle into the bladder to obtain a small sample. This is usually a non-painful procedure performed conscious and most cats tolerate this procedure very well.

Other, more unusual causes of cystitis include bladder stones, infections, or even tumours. All these are actually rarer causes of cystitis, but do become more common in older patients. Depending on your vet's findings, it may be necessary to take blood samples, perform ultrasound scans or even consider x-rays if your cat's symptoms persist or recur in order to rule out these more unusual causes.

It is important to remember that other conditions can present in a similar way to cystitis. 'Blocked bladders' can also present straining to urinate but this is an emergency and requires urgent medical treatment. In this situation, the straining is unproductive – your pet will not be able to pass any urine at all. The urge to urinate results from a progressively full bladder that physically cannot empty. This is more common in males, although has been reported in females. If you suspect your cat is straining unproductively, please contact us as an emergency.

What can I do to help my cat?

1) Increasing water intake:

Any measures which increase your cat's water intake will help produce larger volumes of more dilute urine which may reduce the signs of cystitis and its recurrence. Below are a few tips that may be worth trying:

- a) Feeding canned food/pouches or adding water to dry food
- b) Offering palatable fluids: small amounts of chicken/fish stock, or water from tinned fish can be added to drinking water. This water can also be used to make ice cubes that can then be conveniently added to a water bowl each day to flavour it in an easier way
- c) Providing multiple water bowls around the house (if you have more than one cat, there should be at least one water bowl each, plus one). Cats often like dripping water from taps and water fountains are often an effective way to encourage increased water intake
- d) Finding a water source your cat likes: cats can be fussy & some prefer bottled/rainwater
- e) Using different drinking bowls – some cats prefer ceramic, some prefer glass. It is common for cats to like metal bowls, topped up fully with water so they can feel more secure by seeing the reflection of anyone approaching from behind. Placing the bowl away from the wall so they can face into the room also makes cats feel more secure. Many cats prefer to have their water kept away from their food, stemming evolutionarily from a need to prevent water sources being contaminated by the remains of their prey

2) Behavioural modification

Stress is strongly associated with an increased risk of cystitis. Try to identify any sources of stress & reduce them if possible. One of the commonest sources of stress is other cats.

If your cat is being bullied outside by other cats, it may be worth investing in a personalized cat flap linked to your pet's collar or Identichip so only he/she can get back into your house. In addition, as your cat goes out of the cat flap, your cat will be at his/her most vulnerable before seeing what is around or lying in wait! It may be worth putting some flower pots for hiding purposes by your back door so your cat has chance to adjust when emerging from the cat flap.

If you have more than one cat, it's important to increase the number of feeding & water bowls, as well as litter trays to reduce the chance of bullying. Cats may feel vulnerable using a litter tray when another cat is in the room, so if your cat is prone to cystitis it's particularly important to ensure there is plenty of opportunity for privacy!

Pheromone diffusers may also be helpful. Pheromones are released by cats to help comfort themselves and mark their territory, such as when they rub their faces against you in pleasure. Synthetic copies of such pheromones can be purchased, such as Feliway® in a diffuser or spray form. In combination with management changes, this can be a very effective way to help keep your cat feel calmer and more secure.

3) Medical treatment

It is important to remember that all current treatments for idiopathic cystitis in cats are palliative and episodes will recur and require continued management. If your pet's signs are recurrent, it is important to undertake further tests to make sure we are not missing an underlying cause that may require specifically tailored treatment. If you have any questions about your cat's condition, please do not hesitate to contact us at Chestnut Vets.