



Battling Feline Hypertension

High blood pressure in cats can be a primary illness which needs quick intervention.



Jane Moon has had cats all her life. When Hugo, her 17-year-old male Bengal cat, started acting differently, she knew something might be wrong. Hugo had started howling at night and not sleeping much, and Moon feared he was in pain or experiencing a serious medical problem. At his age, it would not be surprising to see some changes in Hugo, such as diabetes, arthritis, renal disease or loss of hearing or sight. "I was looking for a medical problem—and worried I would not catch it," says Moon, who took him to the veterinarian for two rounds of testing.

The blood, urine, thyroid and kidney values came back normal. On the third visit, her veterinarian checked Hugo's blood pressure and it was discovered that he had hypertension (high blood pressure). He was started on medication, which was adjusted over a few months, and Moon reports that he is calmer, sleeps better and is definitely "more himself." High blood pressure in cats is not unusual, especially in older cats. What was unusual with Hugo is that hypertension was his primary medical issue, when it typically is a secondary health

problem, such as kidney disease and hyperthyroidism. "Although common in humans, primary hypertension in cats is rare," explains Dr. Jane Chetkowsky, of Town and Country Animal Hospital in Naples. "Elevated blood pressure values have been implicated in sudden blindness in cats. When examining the eyes as part of a physical examination, we are looking for signs of redness, dilated blood vessels or evidence of hemorrhage within the eye, which may indicate hypertension." There are no early warning signs of hypertension in cats; it is often

17-YEAR-OLD HUGO IS MORE HIMSELF SINCE RECEIVING TREATMENT.

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discovered with other health symptoms. When signs do occur, they can be sudden and dramatic (like blindness). This occurs because the tiny blood vessels in the eye burst under the increased pressure. Chetkowsky explains that a cat's risk of hypertension increases with age. "Cats do a good job of hiding illness, so annual checkups with a veterinarian are important. We consider cats to be seniors when they are 7-plus years old. The cat's lifestyle (indoor versus outdoor), physical examination, blood screening, urinalysis and blood pressure are all factors that we must consider when determining potential underlying illness. We cannot arrive at a diagnosis until we have performed the necessary diagnostic tests."

Cats' blood pressure is taken the same way it is in humans. Cuffs of various sizes can be placed on the front or hind leg—even the tail. At least five blood pressure readings are taken. (Cats, like many humans, experience what's known as the "white coat syndrome." Visits to a doctor or a vet can make a patient nervous, which raises their blood pressure and pulse rate.) The blood pressure values are compared to subsequent visits, in

addition to the cat's temperament, location of the cuff and cuff size, and staff member performing the test.

"Just as in humans, two numbers are generated when we are assessing a cat's blood pressure. The first number, the systolic pressure, measures the amount of pressure in the arteries when the heart beats. The second number—or diastolic pressure—measures the arterial pressure when the heart pauses in between beats," Chetkowsky explains. "A normal blood pressure reading in a cat (160/100) runs considerably higher than for humans (120/80)."

Feline hypertension is clearly damaging, leading to a faster progression of a serious, underlying disease. It's important to address hypertension while the cat is being treated for kidney disease or hyperthyroidism. Chetkowsky generally uses two types of medications to treat

hypertension in cats. Calcium channel blockers and ACE (angiotensin-converting-enzyme) inhibitors relax and dilate the blood vessels, thus decreasing the pressure. Each cat has to be evaluated for the best medications for hypertension and other medical conditions. "Fortunately, feline hypertension is manageable and sometimes even reversible, particularly when the primary disease can be controlled," Chetkowsky says.

Subtle changes may occur over time, so yearly visits to the vet are crucial in intervention. Hugo is doing well on his daily medications. Had Moon not considered his behavior abnormal for him, she and Hugo would be dealing with more serious medical conditions. ❁

Gina Stancel is an avid animal lover who focuses her freelance photography and writing on animals and animal-related causes.



Signs of Feline Hypertension

- ❁ Increased drinking and urination
- ❁ Loss of appetite
- ❁ Weight loss
- ❁ Decreased activity levels
- ❁ Communicating discomfort or distress
- ❁ Tilting of the head
- ❁ Difficulties walking
- ❁ Appearing disoriented or to be having seizures

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