

CLIENT INFORMATION SHEET **FELINE HYPERTHYROIDISM**

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What is it?

Hyperthyroidism is the most common hormone problem (endocrinopathy) seen in older cats in the UK and results in an overproduction of thyroid hormones. Like us, cats have two thyroid glands either side of the neck but some can also have thyroid tissue in the chest.

The thyroid gland enlargement (goitre) is usually the result of a benign adenoma (growth) in one or both of the glands but can also, more rarely, be the result of a more aggressive carcinoma. More recent research suggests that if treated medically for a period of time (years) the incidence of thyroid carcinomas increases from approximately 3% to 20%. The growth(s) result in increased circulating thyroid hormones and these have an adverse effect on the rest of the body.

- More common clinical signs include:
- weight loss despite a normal or increased appetite
 - increased drinking and urination
 - poor coat quality
 - hyperactivity or 'kitten like' behaviour
 - vocalising or crying at night and restlessness
 - diarrhoea and sometimes vomiting
 - extra strain on the heart and subsequent heart disease (often a fast heart rate) or heart failure
 - increased blood pressure (and increased risk of blindness or stroke)

Diagnosis

In many animals your vet may be able to feel an enlarged thyroid gland in the neck. If the clinical signs and history fit we will likely recommend a blood test to check the blood levels of total thyroid hormones. If these levels are high then the diagnosis is confirmed. In some cases the result may be equivocal and we may recommend repeat testing at a later date or checking different thyroid hormone levels.

Hyperthyroidism is a disease of older cats and this unfortunately means that some may have concurrent disease, especially kidney problems and heart disease. If your cat does have concurrent problems this will effect the treatment options so we will usually recommend additional screening blood tests and possible heart investigations or blood pressure checks.

Treatment options

The good news is that hyperthyroidism is a common and treatable condition. There are several treatment options, some which offer a permanent solution (radioiodine or surgery) and others that will manage the condition (medication or special food).

Hyperthyroidism can sometimes mask concurrent problems such as kidney disease so we will often start with medication (tablets) for a few weeks to check that everything will be OK. If the kidney function is adequate (checked with a blood test) we can then consider radioiodine or surgery as a longer term solution. If there are kidney problems we will likely recommend medication (tablets), although this will need to be for life with regular monitoring and dose adjustment. Some owners opt to stay with medical management.

Treatment option 1. Radioiodine

Radioiodine is the treatment of choice in veterinary and human medicine but its use has been hampered by the limited number of centres that can offer the service. We are delighted that here at Forest Veterinary Centre we can now offer radioiodine treatment at our Radioiodine Unit based at the new Eastwick Lodge, Harlow surgery.

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Radioiodine (radioactive I131) is given by injection under the skin. It is then taken up by the abnormal thyroid tissue only, which it destroys. It does not affect the rest of the body and offers a cure rate of approximately 92% (the full benefit can take six months). The health and safety regulations regarding radioiodine treatment in cats are much stricter than for humans and this means that the treatment can only be given at certain centres. In the past cats had to stay at the vets for four weeks after treatment but we are pleased that this is now down to two weeks. Your cat will be well looked after by trained nurses during this time but no visiting is allowed and the patients cannot go home before the 14 days have passed.

Please see our Radioiodine client information sheet for more details on this treatment and the aftercare requirements. Radioiodine is not suitable for all patients and the treatment costs £1500 (incl. VAT, but excluding and pre or post treatment tests).

Treatment option 2. Surgery

Surgery (thyroidectomy) involves the removal of the affected thyroid gland. If possible, cats are stabilised on medication for several weeks before the operation to minimise risks associated with the general anaesthetic and operation. If the kidneys are OK the operation is carried out on a day-patient basis.

The affected thyroid gland is removed (unilateral thyroidectomy) and the remaining side checked. The parathyroid gland is a small gland very close to the thyroid which controls calcium levels. Great care is taken to avoid damaging these glands but if affected during a bilateral operation the low calcium levels can be a serious and potential fatal complication. This risk is avoided if only one side is removed. It is not uncommon that the remaining thyroid gland becomes a problem later and the options are then a second side thyroidectomy (and up to seven days hospitalisation post op), radioiodine, medication or special diet.

The cost of initial investigation and unilateral thyroidectomy is approximately £700 (incl. VAT) and approximately £700 (incl. VAT) or more for a second side thyroidectomy and hospitalisation.

Treatment option 3. Medication

Anti-thyroid medication deactivates the thyroid hormones rather than addressing the underlying problem in the thyroid gland and requires life long daily, or twice daily, tablets. Bloods tests will be needed to check the thyroid values come down to the correct levels and it is not uncommon to have to increase the dose over time.

Not all cats tolerate tablets well and some may have side effects such as vomiting, skin rashes or blood problems. The tablets should not be crushed and should be handled with gloves by women of child bearing age, or during pregnancy. A trans-dermal gel applied to the ear can be considered but has less predictable results. The cost of initial investigation and medical treatment for one year is approximately £850 incl. VAT and then ongoing.

Treatment option 4. Special Diet

A special diet that is iodine depleted has been launched (Hills yd ®) and can bring down the thyroid hormone levels if used as the sole diet. This can be difficult in a multicat household or if your cat hunts, is a fussy eater, or has specific dietary requirements. If your cats eats anything else the benefit of the diet is lost. There is no 'dose' and the cost of initial investigation and one year's food is approximately £2500 incl VAT, depending on how much food is needed, and this is ongoing for life.

What Should I choose?

Your vet will discuss the treatment options with you and together decide which course of action is best. Not all options are suitable for all cats. Radioiodine, surgery and medication all involve tablets initially so this is often the starting point with a review and blood test after 3-4 weeks to decide on the longer term strategy.

Please do not hesitate to ring the surgery and speak to your vet if you have any questions.

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