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INSULIN, DIETARY THERAPY SHOWN TO EFFECTIVELY TREAT DIABETES IN CATS

Pet owners are often surprised that many of the illnesses that we recognize in people can affect their cats and dogs.

Diabetes mellitus, sometimes called "sugar" diabetes, is one of those diseases that veterinarians diagnose and treat. Recently, a new insulin for people has dramatically improved the outlook for feline diabetic patients.

Insulin is a hormone that allows the sugar in the bloodstream to enter cells so it can be used for energy. I like to use the analogy of a fireplace that must burn wood as a fuel to heat the house. With a very small door to load the wood, the fuel builds up on the outside and the fire can't burn efficiently.

Without functional insulin, which is the door in our example, the sugar in the bloodstream, like the wood, can't get into the cells to run the system.

When the fuel can't get in to be used, the body will start to burn alternative fuels and the sugar builds in the bloodstream. Some of the excess sugar will leave the body through the urine and the alternative fuels really don't burn well.

The symptoms of diabetes arise from the overflow of sugar into the urine and the poorly functioning "furnace." Most clients first notice a marked increased thirst and, thus, urine output, and a hungry pet that may be losing weight. The sugar overflow into the urine draws water with it that the pets must replace with an increased thirst.

The body is demanding more energy, but though the "woodpile" of sugar is building up to overflowing, it can't really get into the muscles and other cells to be used. So the body will begin to function in a starvation mode by digesting fat, protein and stored starches to provide calories. The weight loss occurs from this scrounging for energy.

We can diagnose diabetes by testing for blood and urine sugar. It is important to note that there are other illnesses that produce the symptoms of increased thirst and weight loss with hunger. And there are some other conditions that predispose pets to diabetes that may need to be managed as well.

Diabetic dogs almost always must be managed with injected insulin and dietary control. Unfortunately, the human oral anti-diabetes medications have not been useful in dogs and only Glucotrol has had limited success in cats.

But recently, with early diagnosis, many cats can become nondiabetic. With the careful, short-term use of human Lantus insulin and aggressive dietary therapy, many cats convert and no longer need injections.

This possibility has veterinary professionals excited. In our hospital, we have had the pleasure of helping more than five cat patients become diabetes-free in this manner.

Once again, routine wellness testing and working with your veterinarian are the keys for early diagnosis. And in the case of feline diabetes, we may together be able to offer a cure.

For more information about this important topic, visit www.felinediabetes.com

Dr. Pat Mahoney is the owner of American Animal Hospital in Neenah, an AAHA certified pet care clinic. To submit your pet related questions for a future column, go to the email link at www.ameranimal.com.