

This Life-or-Death Disease May Not Even Be on Your Radar

It can be mild and hardly interfere with quality of life - easy to ignore. Or life-threatening with oxygen deprivation, a true emergency. What you should know even about the mild cases - plus 12 great ways to sidestep the worst problems in the first place.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Asthma occurs in about 1 percent of adult cats in the U.S., or about 800,000
- Symptoms of feline asthma include a dry hack, wheezing, labored or open-mouthed breathing and panting
- Suspected triggers for asthma in cats include a wide range of indoor and outdoor inhalants
- Asthma shares symptoms with several other serious feline diseases, so it's very important to obtain an accurate diagnosis
- Eliminating triggers, cleaning up kitty's environment and diet and a natural healing protocol can dramatically improve symptoms and reduce the amount of drugs needed to manage your cat's asthma

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It's estimated about 1 percent of adult cats (around 800,000) in the U.S. suffer from either acute or chronic asthma, which is also referred to as bronchial asthma, allergic bronchitis and chronic bronchitis.

Asthma is characterized by a constriction (narrowing) of the airways, or bronchi, which are two thin tubes that run from the trachea to the lungs. In a kitty with asthma, the immune system overreacts to the presence of an allergen, creating inflammation and swelling of the tissues of the bronchi.

This leads to spasms of the muscles of the airways, which causes them to constrict, making it difficult for kitty to move air into and out of her lungs.

Feline Asthma Symptoms

Cats with asthma can't draw a deep breath, but it's not always obvious. Instead, kitty develops a dry hack that often sounds like gagging or retching. In fact, some cats with asthma are initially diagnosed with hairballs.

Wheezing, which can sound like a high-pitched sigh or a whistle, is another classic symptom. Labored breathing and exercise intolerance are also signs.

Even if your cat has a dry cough as her only symptom, it's not necessarily a measure of the severity of the condition. Kitties can have quite serious asthma but very few symptoms. Some cats have no symptoms at all until suddenly they can't breathe. An acute asthma attack can be life-threatening.

Veterinarian Dr. Richard Goldstein, associate professor of small animal medicine at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, describes the typical onset of an asthma attack:

"The cat is at rest, not doing anything at all, or else it's playing and suddenly stops. Its breathing becomes more rapid, and the cat starts trying to take in air with its mouth open.

Its chest and abdomen move up and down abnormally, the breathing is shallow and rapid. And if you listen closely you may be able to detect a wheezing sound as the cat exhales."

Risk Factors for Feline Asthma

Suspected triggers for asthma in cats include:

- Tobacco smoke
- Mold and mildew
- Cat litter dust
- Dust mites
- Vapors from household cleaning products and aerosol sprays
- Fireplace and candle smoke
- Grass, tree and weed pollen
- Certain foods

Asthma affects young, old, male and female cats equally. There may or may not be a genetic component to the disorder. Brachycephalic breeds — cats with flat faces like Persians and Himalayans — are especially susceptible to breathing problems, including asthma.

Diagnosing Asthma in Cats

Symptoms of feline asthma are seen in other diseases as well, so it's extremely important to get an accurate diagnosis. Cats are often misdiagnosed with asthma when they actually have a heart condition; so again, getting a correct diagnosis is crucial.

Sometimes it's obvious just by looking at a kitty that he's making a big effort to breathe. Often the breaths are rapid and shallow, and the abdomen is working really hard to push the air back out. You might also notice your cat breathing through an open mouth or panting, which is definitely abnormal for kitties.

A chest x-ray should be taken if the cat can hold still without too much respiratory distress. An x-ray can help make a correct diagnosis, however, lung changes aren't always visible on x-rays, so sometimes further diagnostics are required.

A transtracheal wash is a procedure that retrieves cells from the lower airways and can be helpful in diagnosing asthma in cats who have symptoms, but whose x-rays are normal.

Another diagnostic test is the bronchoscopy, which involves passing a tiny camera down the bronchi so your veterinarian or veterinary specialist can visualize the interior of the lungs.

Other conditions that can mimic asthma symptoms are systemic allergies, including food allergies, and also heartworm infection. Lungworm is another common reason for asthma-like symptoms in cats. The severity of feline asthma falls into one of four categories:

1. Mild asthma, in which the symptoms occur intermittently, but not daily, and they don't interfere with the cat's quality of life
2. Moderate asthma, in which the symptoms don't occur daily, but are more severe and debilitating when they do occur
3. Severe asthma, in which symptoms are significantly debilitating and occur daily
4. Life-threatening asthma, in which airway constriction can result in a complete inability to breathe, resulting in oxygen deprivation

Obviously, if your cat is at stage 4, you should seek immediate medical care at either your veterinarian's office or the nearest emergency animal hospital. But even if your kitty's condition is mild, it's important to work with your veterinarian to prevent progression of the asthma to a more severe stage, which can happen rapidly.

Treatment Options

If your cat is in crisis, your vet or emergency animal clinic staff will give a small dose of epinephrine that can resolve an asthma attack in as little as 15 minutes. Typically, pure oxygen will be administered at the same time.

In some acute situations, a corticosteroid injection or inhalation treatment via nebulizer is required. These drugs, like all drugs, have side effects, especially the powerful ones like steroids. Once your kitty is stabilized and no longer critical, it's important to work with your vet to determine why the crisis occurred.

Feline asthma is a chronic, progressive disease that in most cases can be managed, but unfortunately, not cured. The goal of treatment is to prevent airway constriction, and reduce the frequency and severity of asthma attacks.

I recommend you talk to a **holistic or integrative veterinarian** about natural remedies to control lung inflammation and promote respiratory health in your kitty. I find naturally extracted plant sterols and sterolins to be beneficial for these patients, as well as homeopathics and Chinese herbs.

I also encourage you to consider acupuncture. Acupuncture helps reduce systemic inflammation in a cat's body, and it can also help reduce the frequency and intensity of asthmatic episodes. In traditional veterinary medicine, there are a variety of drugs used to treat feline asthma, including bronchodilators and specially designed steroid inhalers. Vets often start with one or several of those drugs to manage a severe case of feline asthma.

If your cat is taking drugs to control asthma, my advice is to work with your holistic vet to wean your cat down or off of some of these medications, if at all possible. Some kitties with respiratory disease can be managed without using drugs, but unfortunately, in many situations cats with life-threatening asthma symptoms require at least some drugs to reduce the intensity of attacks and keep them alive.

12 Tips for Helping Your Asthmatic Kitty

1. Give up smoking around your pet and don't let others smoke around him. Second-hand smoke is a major asthma trigger for sensitive cats, and it has also been linked to certain feline cancers.
2. I know fireplaces are wonderful during the cold winter months, but smoke of any kind is a trigger for kitty asthmatics. Fireplace smoke will settle in the low areas of your home, which is where your cat hangs out.
3. Reduce or eliminate all household sprays, including anything that is aerosolized. Make sure kitty isn't in the same room with anyone spraying anything from a bottle or can.
4. Get rid of scented plug-ins, candles, incense, heated potpourri — anything that gives off an aroma. Products that emit a strong scent can be a trigger for sensitive cats and people as well.
5. Switch from chemical household cleaners to “green” natural cleaners.
6. Gradually switch to an unscented, low dust cat litter. Mix the new litter with the litter your cat is used to, and gradually phase out the old stuff. Also, never use bleach to disinfect the box, especially if it has a hood. Use only dish soap or vinegar and rinse with warm water.
7. If you have pet pest problems, use an all-natural, safe pest repellent for flea and tick control.
8. Invest in an air purifier and replace your HVAC air filters regularly.
9. If your cat is overweight, get her down to a healthy size very gradually. Obesity makes lungs work a lot harder.
10. Make sure your cat's daily routine stays very consistent. Kitties don't do well with changes in their environment, and any type of stress can be a potential trigger for asthma. Try to keep the environment low-stress for your asthmatic cat.
11. Feed a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate, fresh food diet. Asthma is caused by inflammation of the airways in the lungs, and pro-inflammatory foods like carbohydrates can worsen any inflammatory condition in the body. I recommend not feeding your kitty any type of food containing corn, wheat, rice or millet. Avoid grains and starches altogether.
12. Consider switching your cat to a raw food diet and a new or novel protein source. If your pet's asthma is a respiratory manifestation of a systemic allergic response, just switching away from the poultry or seafood, for example, that your cat may be addicted to can make a big difference.

If you're vigilant about eliminating potential asthma triggers for your kitty, you're attending to her environment (which includes her diet) and you're partnering with a holistic vet to create a natural healing protocol, you can often reduce both the frequency and severity of your cat's asthma symptoms, and also the amount of drugs your pet needs.

Sources and References

[Veterinary Practice News November 9, 2016](#)
