

The Silent Symptoms of Cat Hypertension

The subtle signals of high blood pressure in felines unraveled. Delve into the world of feline health to uncover the whispering signs of hypertension that could mean the difference between health and heartache.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Cats can and do develop hypertension (high blood pressure), but it's most often secondary to another disease such as kidney failure or hyperthyroidism; unchecked hypertension can result in damage to the heart, brain, kidneys and eyes
- Since hypertension doesn't typically cause noticeable symptoms, it's important to take blood pressure readings during veterinary exams, especially for cats over 8 and those with kidney or thyroid disease
- Diagnosing hypertension in cats can be challenging, because it requires accurate blood pressure readings and felines are often very stressed during veterinary exams; an eye test called the ocular fundic exam can potentially help identify high blood pressure early
- Treatment of feline hypertension involves identifying and controlling the underlying disease first; the right diet, appropriate supplementation, and an enriched, stress-free environment can be very beneficial in preserving the health of hypertensive cats

Just like humans, feline family members can develop high blood pressure (hypertension); however, in humans the condition is often idiopathic (cause unknown), whereas in cats, it's typically the result of another disease or disorder.

Some cats with kidney disease will develop hypertension because the kidneys play a role in controlling blood pressure. When the kidneys are damaged, the cat's blood pressure may increase. A number of other conditions, including heart disease and hyperthyroidism, can also be contributors. In some cases, the cause can't be identified.

High blood pressure in both humans and cats usually doesn't cause noticeable symptoms, which is why we often find out about it during a physical exam at the doctor's (or veterinarian's) office. The lack of symptoms is also why hypertension has been dubbed the "silent killer" by the American Heart Association.¹

Signs and Symptoms of Hypertension

Since high blood pressure often has no signs or symptoms, it's an especially dangerous condition because it can go unnoticed. When a kitty's blood pressure is too high, it can result in damage to the following body systems:²

- **Heart** — Trouble breathing, signs of stroke including dragging a limb or both hindlimbs, collapse
- **Brain** — Unexplained changes in behavior including increased meowing and howling
- **Kidneys** — Increased drinking, large urine clumps in the litter box, vomiting

- **Eyes (retinas)** — Sudden blindness including bumping into furniture, missing jumps, walking along walls to help with direction

Especially in senior and geriatric cats, very severe hypertension typically occurs secondary to either **kidney disease** or hyperthyroidism. If this is the case with your kitty, symptoms of those diseases will be what you notice and often include:

- Loss of appetite
- Vomiting
- Increased thirst and urination
- Weight loss
- Dull coat

Diagnosing Hypertension at the Vet's Office

When you take your cat for a wellness exam, your veterinarian might notice a new heart murmur or alterations in the eyes, both of which should prompt a blood pressure reading. Your vet can take your cat's blood pressure with a cuff placed on any leg or the tail.

The procedure is painless, and if your kitty is cooperative and not overly anxious, an accurate reading can be taken in just a few minutes. However, if your cat is stressed during veterinary visits (and many are), it can have a dramatic influence on his blood pressure.

If this is the case with your pet, it may be helpful to sit with him and soothe him until he's more relaxed. Also consider administering a flower essence (e.g., a Holistic Solutions blend) or homeopathic Aconitum prior to your appointment. These remedies can greatly reduce the likelihood of stress-induced increases in blood pressure readings. Several readings may need to be taken to obtain an accurate blood pressure. For highly stressed cats, consider locating a mobile veterinarian who comes to your home.

If a cat's high blood pressure isn't addressed, the most common eventual symptom will be sudden blindness. Blood vessels in the eye burst, causing the retina to detach, and the kitty loses part or all of her eyesight.

Interestingly, a 2014 study published in the New Zealand Veterinary Journal suggests routine fundic exams (eye exams that evaluate the back portion of the interior of the eyeball) in cats over the age of 8 can reveal ocular lesions associated with high blood pressure before symptoms appear.³ According to the study authors:

"Ocular fundic examination of cats over 8 years of age allows identification of cats with hypertensive ocular lesions, often before the owner or veterinarian is aware the cat has a problem with its vision. This may result in diagnosis of systemic hypertension, allowing early treatment and resolutions of lesions.

The current study demonstrates that ocular lesions resulting from hypertension occur frequently enough in cats in Auckland to support the recommendation for fundic examination in cats over eight years of age as part of the routine physical examination."⁴

If your cat is middle-aged or older, and especially if he's been diagnosed with kidney or **thyroid disease**, consider asking your integrative veterinarian about an ocular fundic examination.

This is one of the many reasons I encourage regular veterinary visits, preferably twice a year, and especially if your pet is older. The sooner you know about your cat's high blood pressure, the sooner you can take action to prevent organ damage.

Treatment Options

If your cat is diagnosed with hypertension, the first step is to identify and address any underlying disease. If no organ damage has occurred and your cat's blood pressure isn't dangerously high, regular monitoring of blood pressure readings while treating the underlying condition may be all that's required initially.

If you must use hypertension medications, I recommend starting with a lower-than-recommended dose, as many cats respond well to sub-therapeutic doses. You can have these medications compounded into appropriate doses for felines. If your kitty isn't showing any symptoms of high blood pressure, I recommend starting with nutraceuticals, homeopathics and herbs. Work with your integrative vet on a protocol that also addresses the root cause of the issue. Additional suggestions:

- It's important to feed a nutritionally optimal, species-specific diet, and if your kitty is overweight, you'll need to help her get those extra pounds off by offering portion-controlled meals and daily aerobic exercise. Feeding a low-glycemic diet and avoiding **carbohydrates** will keep your cat insulin sensitive.
- Make sure kitty is getting enough vitamin C and E. Studies indicate these vitamins can be helpful in lowering blood pressure. If you and your veterinarian decide a supplement makes sense, be sure to provide a natural (not synthetic) form of vitamin E. Natural vitamin E is always listed as the "d" form (d-alpha-tocopherol, d-beta-tocopherol, etc.) Synthetics are listed as "dl" forms and spelled "tocopheryl" ("yl" instead of "ol").
- Consider supplementing with olive leaf extract, which can cause a significant reduction in both blood pressure and LDL cholesterol. Talk with your integrative veterinarian about appropriate dosing for your cat.
- Consuming omega-3 fats is one of the best ways to re-sensitize your cat's insulin receptors and decrease blood pressure. Supplementing with a **high-quality krill oil** is a good source of omega-3 fatty acids.
- Consider electroacupuncture, which has been shown to temporarily lower elevations in blood pressure in animals by as much as 50%.
- **Avoid unnecessary vaccinations.**
- Maintain consistency in your cat's environment and routine. Kitties become highly stressed by changes in their external world, and a cat who is already dealing with health challenges needs a calm, consistent, **enriched environment.**

Sources and References

¹ [American Heart Association](#)

² [American Association of Feline Practitioners](#)

^{3,4} [New Zealand Veterinary Journal, Volume 62, Issue 1, 2014](#)
