

Asthma

By Dr. Karen Becker

Hi, this is Dr. Karen Becker. Today we are going to discuss asthma. Asthma, which is also referred to as allergic bronchitis, bronchial asthma, or chronic bronchitis, is a condition in which a pet has recurrent attacks of wheezing, shortness of breath, and difficulty breathing. Asthma is seen much more so in kitties than in dogs. It's also more prevalent in brachycephalic breeds, which are dogs and cats with flat faces, such as Persian cats and pugs.

During an asthma attack, there is a constriction of the airways leading to the lungs. There can be a buildup of mucus that collects in the airways that can cause animals to have a very inflamed airway and sometimes even an ulcerated airway. In response, the muscles of the airways spasm causing constriction that makes it very difficult for your pet to breathe.

Causes

Airway constriction in pets can occur for no reason, or it can be triggered by something in the environment or something that the animal has eaten or inhaled. There are many common triggers for pet asthma – including grasses, pollens, and ragweed.

Air pollution, including smog and smoke from wildfires or crop burning, can also trigger a response. Fertilizers and pesticides can trigger a response. Home remodeling products, including paint can be an issue. Aerosol sprays of any kind, including room fresheners, can be a trigger. Cigarette smoke or fireplace smoke can be a problem. Mold and mildew as well as household chemicals and cleaning products, including carpet cleaners.

Dust mites can trigger an asthma attack as well as cat litter dust. Animal dander from a new or visiting pet can be a problem, or even taking your pet to the vet or a boarding experience can also trigger an asthma attack.

Symptoms

Pets with asthma can't draw in a deep breath. Symptoms can include a variety of difference. In most pets, certainly a dry hacking cough that often sounds like a gag, sometimes a retching can occur, wheezing or a high pitch almost whistle breathing can be a symptoms. Labored breathing obviously. Open-mouth breathing can be a big clue that your pet is suffering from an asthmatic condition.

Exercise intolerance, pale mucus membranes inside the mouth can be an issue. Especially, they can turn blue if your pet's not moving enough air at all. Lethargy can occur. Lack of appetite and weight loss can occur if it's a chronic asthmatic situation. Certainly there can be irreversible damage to the sensitive lining of the respiratory airways if the condition goes undiagnosed. If it's a chronic condition that has not been addressed, there can be major and irreversible changes.

In cats, noticeable asthma symptoms aren't necessarily a measure of the severity of the condition as kitties can have very serious asthmatic disease with very few observable symptoms. Some cats show no symptoms at all and then are suddenly unable to breathe, which is obviously incredibly scary. An acute asthma attack that can cause suffocation in your pet is license to go to the emergency veterinarian immediately.

Diagnosis

Symptoms of canine or feline asthma are seen in other diseases as well. It's extremely important to get an

accurate diagnosis. For instance, cats with heart conditions are very often misdiagnosed with asthma. Obviously those two medical diseases are treated entirely differently. A correct diagnosis is really important.

Other conditions that can mimic asthma symptoms are systemic allergies, including food allergies as well as heartworm infection. Lungworm infection is another common reason for asthma-like symptoms in both dogs and cats. Sometimes it's quite obvious by simply looking at the animal that he's having trouble breathing. If their breaths are very shallow or rapid breathing or if the abdomen is working really, really hard to push air back out.

Obviously you can look at your dog or cat and see if they're having trouble breathing. There can also be open-mouth breathing, which is not normal in kitties at all. If you have a kitty that's lying on the couch and open-mouth breathing, not normal.

Typically there can be chest X-rays, but interestingly, chest X-rays don't always show changes in the lungs. A transtracheal wash is a procedure where we would treat cells from the lower airways. That can be helpful in diagnosing asthma, especially if there's no changes on X-rays.

Other tests that can help eliminate or confirm causes of acute or chronic coughing includes a transtracheal wash or bronchoalveolar lavage, bronchoscopy with a specimen collection (which is passing a camera down), heartworm and fecal testing (to check for internal parasites), echocardiography (to assess the heart function), and comprehensive blood and urine evaluation (to assess your pet's systemic health).

Since diagnosing asthma in a pet isn't always straightforward, any information you can provide to the veterinarian will be really helpful.

For example, how long has your pet been coughing? Is it more of a cough or is it a gas? Is there wheezing and choking response going on? Is there any other responses that you're seeing that aren't normal? When did the coughing start? Is it a dry cough? Or is your pet experiencing a productive or a wet cough which is coming up? Is the mucus colored? Is it blood tinged or green?

Are there sneezing or wheezing fits associated with the difficulty breathing and how often do these episodes occur? Once a week, only happening a night? How long do they last? All great questions that your veterinarian would like answers for. If you're thinking about those answers to those questions, we appreciate that.

Treatment

If your pet is having an asthma-related crisis, your vet or emergency clinic will administer a small dose of epinephrine to resolve the asthma attack and to save your pet's life in many situations usually within minutes. A 100 percent oxygen is also administered at the same time. Sometimes in acute asthma situations, inhalant treatments with a nebulizer with or without additional medications is also required.

The goal of long-term treatment for asthma is to identify and eliminate triggers in your pet's environment if at all possible. In the case of chronic asthma, complete resolution of the cough is almost never possible. But in those cases, the goal is to reduce the frequency and severity of the cough, so that your pet is more comfortable.

I recommend that you talk to a holistic veterinarian about natural remedies to control lung inflammation and promote respiratory health in your cat or dog. These can include anti-inflammatory plant sterols and sterolins. The use of many different homeopathics which are based on symptoms that your particular pet is experiencing as well as some great anti-inflammatory Chinese herbs. Acupuncture interestingly can also really be beneficial for asthmatic patients.

In conventional veterinary medicine, there are a wide variety of drugs that conventional vets use to treat asthma, including bronchodilators and especially designed steroid inhalers. Vets often start with one or several of these drugs to manage severe asthma cases.

If your pet is taking drugs to control asthma, my advice is to work with and ask your local veterinarian to refer you to a holistic veterinarian who could potentially help you wean many of these animals off these medications or at least down the amount of medication needed to manage dogs and cats with respiratory disease.

It is quite possible to manage dogs and cats with low to no drugs, but it needs to be done over time and you need to have a great replacement protocol placed before you would ever consider weaning dogs or cats off of asthmatic drugs. In some situations, pets with life-threatening asthma do require some drugs to save their lives and to reduce the intensity of attacks.

The great news is if you're vigilant about eliminating potential asthmatic triggers for your pet and if you're working with a holistic veterinarian who has great holistic protocols, you're absolutely, in many cases, capable of reducing both the frequency and the severity of your pet's asthmatic symptoms and also reduce the amount of drugs you need to manage their condition.

There are some excellent things you can do to reduce the intensity of your pet's condition like, don't smoke. Either give up smoking – my preferred recommendation – or don't smoke around your dog or cat. Don't let anyone smoke in your home around your pets. Second-hand smoke is a major trigger for asthma in sensitive pets.

Give up using your fireplace. That's a tough one but can be a really important one. Smoke of any kind can absolutely trigger your dog or cat for an asthma attack. Fireplace smoke will settle at the lowest areas of your home, which is where pets usually are.

Reduce or eliminate all household sprays, including anything that's aerosolized. Make sure your pet isn't in the same room with anyone spraying anything from a can or bottle. Get rid of everything scented in your house – scented plug-ins, scented candles, incense, heated potpourri. Anything that gives off a smell or odor even if it's natural, get rid of it, because inhaled particle can trigger an asthmatic response.

It's important to switch from chemical household cleaners to green cleaners. But even when you use, let's say, vinegar to clean your home, there's absolutely an aroma. Make sure that if you're using all-natural cleaners, you have a well-ventilated home and your removing your pet from that environment until all the organic cleaner odors are gone.

If your pet is a cat, I recommend you switch to an unscented, low-dust variety of litter. If you're using a litter that has a bunch of synthetic smells right now, get your new unscented low-dust litter and mix it in, then slowly wean your kitty onto a scent-free low-dust litter. It's also important that you're not disinfecting the litter box with things like bleach, because that can be a trigger for kitty asthmatics. Just use plain 'ole dish soap or vinegar. But again, rinse it afterwards to make sure there's no residual scent or whatsoever in the box.

If your pet has parasite problems, I recommend using all-natural, very safe pest repellent instead of using chemicals. I recommend you invest in an air purifier for your home, specifically the area where your dog or cat lives. Of course, replace your heating ventilation and air-conditioning (HVAC) filters regularly in your home.

If your animal companion is overweight, dieting him or her down to a healthy size is really important. Obviously, being obese or even carrying a few extra pounds makes your pet's respiratory system work a lot harder.

Make sure that your pet's daily routine stays very consistent, especially if you have kitties. Kitties don't like

change. For cats, change equals stress. Any type of stress within your kitty's environment can be a potential trigger for an asthma attack.

Feed a species-appropriate diet. A species-appropriate diet for dogs and cats also means an anti-inflammatory diet. Asthma is caused by inflammation. Reducing inflammation across the board, including coming in from dietary ingredients is really important. Eliminating pro-inflammatory foods like carbohydrates, corn, wheat, rice is a really good idea. Avoiding not only grains but anything that's genetically modified is a really great idea in reducing the potential body reaction to pro-inflammatory ingredients or substances.

Consider switching your pet to a raw food diet or fresh food diet and a novel protein, which means if your dog or cat has been eating chicken its whole life, consider switching to rabbit or goat. If your pet's asthma is a respiratory manifestation of systemic allergic response, I have seen many, many times, switching away from a pro-inflammatory or an allergic source of protein or even seafoods – if you have a kitty eating seafood – and switching onto a goat or rabbit as a protein source can be incredibly anti-inflammatory and minimize your pet's systemic anti-inflammatory response.