

# Love Your Cat? Don't Let These Serious Symptoms Go Unnoticed

These serious symptoms can escape notice because they mimic normal cat behavior. It's important to make an appointment to see your vet if you notice any of these, even if it's only a slight change.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The pancreas performs two jobs vital to life: producing insulin to balance blood sugar, and producing digestive enzymes. Pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas that causes the organ to malfunction
- In symptomatic cats, the most common signs of pancreatitis are lethargy and lack of appetite. Some kitties also show symptoms of a tender abdomen, vomiting, and fever
- The root causes of feline pancreatitis are not well understood, but most kitties with the condition also suffer from gastrointestinal tract inflammation, which typically stems from a reaction to allergenic ingredients in processed pet food
- The conclusive test for pancreatitis in cats is the feline pancreatic lipase immunoreactivity (fPLI) test. Typically, a number of additional diagnostic tests are required to rule out other potential diseases with similar symptoms
- Treatment involves supporting the patient through the crisis phase of the disease, and taking steps to prevent future flare-ups

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published February 18, 2015.***

Feline pancreatitis is inflammation of a cat's pancreas that can disrupt its normal functions and cause other symptoms as well. An inflamed pancreas is a serious problem, because the organ serves two vital functions in the body. It produces hormones — insulin and glucagon — that balance blood sugar. It also produces digestive enzymes such as amylase, lipase, and proteases, which enable the body to use carbohydrates, fats and proteins for energy.

One of the mysteries of pancreatitis is that the severity of inflammation can range from very mild to fatal. Estimates are that between 40% and 70% of cats show signs of pancreatitis at autopsy. Not all those cats died of a problem with the pancreas, which suggests the organ is predisposed to injury and damage secondary to other diseases.

## Symptoms of Pancreatitis in Cats

Another mystery of feline pancreatitis is that often there are few overt symptoms. Unlike dogs with the condition who typically have vomiting and abdominal pain, symptoms in cats are sometimes so mild they aren't noticeable.

The most common signs in kitties are lethargy and lack of appetite. Since cats naturally sleep a lot and many are finicky eaters, these symptoms are often mistaken for normal feline behavior.

Some cats show signs of a tender abdomen, vomiting, and even a fever, but they tend to be the exception. That's why a good rule of thumb if you're a cat guardian is to make an appointment with your veterinarian if you notice any changes in kitty's weight, appetite, thirst, elimination, or behavior. Any such change is a sign something's going on inside the body that requires investigation.

## **Feline Pancreatitis Follows Chronic GI Inflammation**

Another puzzle surrounding feline pancreatitis is what causes it. Most in the traditional veterinary community believe there is no identifiable cause in 90% of cases.

In a small percentage of cats, the condition has its roots in trauma to the pancreas, a viral or parasitic infection, or exposure to a toxin like organophosphates typically found in pesticides. In some cases, a clear correlation to dietary indiscretion can be made. My brother's cat knocked over a bottle of olive oil one night and licked it all up, which caused acute pancreatitis.

Certain drugs are also known to trigger bouts of pancreatitis, including phenobarbital, prednisone and other **glucocorticoids**, and diuretics.

However, in my experience, most cats who develop chronic or recurrent pancreatitis also suffer from inflammation in their GI tract in the form of enteritis, gastritis, colitis, or inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). The underlying reason for most GI tract inflammation in pets is food allergies, and most commercial cat foods contain allergenic ingredients.

## **Processed Cat Food and GI Inflammation**

Since one of the jobs of the pancreas is to secrete enzymes to aid digestion, when your kitty's GI tract becomes inflamed and starts to malfunction, the pancreas overworks itself trying to produce a sufficient amount of digestive enzymes for use by the intestines.

Another problem with processed cat food is it lacks natural enzymes. The prey cats eat in the wild supplements the enzymes produced by the body, which reduces the workload on the pancreas. Fed a processed diet, over time your kitty's pancreas can become inflamed and stressed from the extra work required to produce enough enzymes.

The pancreas also produces insulin to balance blood sugar. The high carbohydrate content of most commercial cat foods requires high levels of insulin, which is extremely taxing to the pancreas.

When your cat's pancreas is overworked and can no longer do its job well, pancreatitis is the result.

## **Diagnosing Pancreatitis in Cats**

Since many kitties don't have overt symptoms of pancreatitis, and many of the symptoms they do have are associated with several other feline diseases, a number of diagnostic tests are typically required to arrive at a confirmed diagnosis. These can include a physical exam, complete blood count (CBC) and blood chemistry panel to include pancreatic enzyme levels, urinalysis, x-rays, ultrasound, and biopsy. Biopsies of the pancreas are not recommended, however, because they tend to trigger inflammation and can make a bad situation worse.

**Functional GI testing** is very beneficial in diagnosing underlying maldigestion and malabsorption in chronic pancreatitis cases. Addressing a kitty's dysbiotic gut can make all the difference in the world. The goal of both diagnosis and treatment is a noninvasive approach.

## Avoiding Future Flare-Ups

Treatment of feline pancreatitis starts with getting the patient through the crisis phase of the disease. If your cat is anorexic, this usually means hospitalizing him so he can receive IV fluids (the cornerstone of pancreatitis treatment) and supportive medications until the crisis subsides.

Once your kitty's condition is stabilized, one of the best things you can do to avoid another flare up is to supplement her diet with digestive enzymes. Provide supplemental enzymes even if your cat is consuming a fresh food diet. This is because we aren't able to supply our pets with all the pieces and parts found in whole prey that naturally supply food-based pancreatic support (a prey's glandular and GI systems including the whole fresh pancreas, bile, and beneficial bacteria). Digestive enzymes can help "fill in the gaps" of these missing tissues in feline diets.

Offer your cat a high-quality probiotic and transition her to a moisture-rich, carb and grain free novel protein diet to reduce the risk of future episodes of pancreatitis. Standard Process Pancreatrophin and Feline Whole Body Support are also very beneficial for pancreatitis patients.

Unfortunately, pancreatitis often recurs. It's a serious disease that can result in complications like diabetes, hepatic lipidosis (fatty liver), bleeding and clotting disorders, and even brain damage.

Make sure to partner with an integrative or holistic vet to give your cat the best opportunity to stay well.

## Sources and References

[VetStreet, May 27, 2014, \(Archived\)](#)

---