

DIABETES IN CATS

Diabetes is one of the most common endocrine (or glandular) disorders in cats, although no one knows the cause of it for sure. Some of the suspected reasons are genetic predisposition, hormonal imbalance, diseases of the pancreas, and certain medications. Diabetes can strike a cat at any age, but it generally affects middle-aged, obese, neutered male cats. The only breed more susceptible than others is the Burmese, one in ten of which develops diabetes after eight years of age.

When your cat has diabetes, her pancreas doesn't make enough insulin, a hormone necessary to control glucose (sugar) levels in the blood. The process begins as food is digested, and sugar enters the bloodstream. This blood sugar is essential for the body's energy, growth, and repair, but it is the insulin from the pancreas that allows sugar to get from the bloodstream into the tissue cells, like those in muscles, where the cat's body can process it. If there isn't enough insulin, the sugar remains in the bloodstream where it is useless to the body; it then gets filtered out in the urine. A lot of water goes out with the sugar, which is why diabetics produce a large volume of urine.

Therefore, diabetic (or borderline diabetic) cats drink excessive amounts of water, to avoid dehydration. And because their bodies lack the insulin to convert the sugar in the bloodstream into useable fuel for the muscles, the body automatically switches to using its own fat and protein as a source of energy, which is why diabetic cats usually lose weight as a result, yet overweight cats are more likely to get diabetes in the first place. The same is true with people.

The classic signs of diabetes are obvious: the cat drinks enormous amounts; urinates copiously, and has a good appetite, but loses weight. If you notice these symptoms, particularly all at once, make a vet appointment right away. Once in a while, the classic signs aren't so clear, and even the lab tests aren't definitive. There are further tests your vet can do to make the diagnosis.

Diabetes cannot be cured. It can, however, be treated and kept under control. Diabetes in cats is best managed with a combination of the right diet, exercise, and, in some cases, insulin, either by injection, or taken orally.

A high-protein, low carbohydrate diet is best for diabetes. Ideally, the goal is to reduce the amount of body fat by feeding a diet of no more than 20% carbohydrates. There are commercial diets specifically formulated for feline diabetes, but when you read about the quality of food ingredients in commercial cat food in the nutrition chapter, you may decide to fashion your own diabetes diet. We're really just talking about feeding your cat lots of meat, and a high protein diet is actually what a cat would be eating if guided by her own instincts. Just remember that with a diabetic cat you should always consult with your vet about any changes you want to make in her diet, to accommodate her diabetes.

Many people are squeamish at the thought of giving an injection to their diabetic cat. In most cases, cats tolerate the shot much better than having a pill forced down their throat. Once you get the hang of it, you'll find a shot is easy to give and will cause no discomfort to your cat. There is now a synthetic human insulin called *Lantus*, or glargine, being used for cats. It's readily available, cost-effective, and long lasting -- which are all the benefits it also offers people who use it.

In addition, there is now an instructional video available that shows how to check your cat's blood sugar level at home. Many vets caution against this; it turns out that the stress caused by a home blood examination in cats can raise the glucose level, giving a false high reading. Again, I'd strongly suggest consulting your vet in terms of managing this disease.