

COMMON AILMENTS IN ELDERLY CATS

With improved nutrition & veterinary care it is perceived that cats are living longer. The following chart (Courtesy of Fort Dodge) provides a good guide to your cat's equivalent age.

Human years	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Cats real age	15	24	28	32	36	40	44	48	52	56	60	64	68	72	76	80	84	88	92	100

I have long said that 20 year old cats equate to 100 year old humans and warrant a telegram from the Queen. A rough guide is to multiply your older cats age by 5 (not 7).

Our knowledge of feline nutrition has advanced markedly in the last 42 years. We now never see cases of calcium deficiency (nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism) causing fragile bones (the result of feeding a meat only diet). The advent of commercially prepared foods both wet and dry has seen most cats fed a balanced diet. A downside of feeding just mushy wet food is an increase in dental problems.

CHRONIC KIDNEY DISEASE

When cats are young under normal circumstances kidneys operate at 100% capacity. It is only when this capacity in older cats is reduced to about 30% that signs of renal disease become apparent. This is why both humans and cats can donate a healthy kidney without untoward effects. Creek Road Vet Clinic run a kidney transplant unit in Brisbane. An interesting aspect of this unit is that the owner of the recipient cat is obliged to adopt the donor cat.

In cats older than 10 years the incidence of chronic kidney disease (CKD) is approx 30%. Early detection of CKD will help in slowing the progression of the disease. Hence our 7yr+ health checks play an important role in detecting a problem. One should suspect CKD if your cat starts drinking more, becomes increasingly fussy with its food and loses weight. Urine and blood tests can determine the extent of the disease.

Whilst the very process of aging causes kidney deterioration the presence of chronic infections exacerbate the insult to the kidneys greatly. Bacteria from

infected mouths containing rotten teeth get into the bloodstream and with 20% of cardiac output going to the kidneys it is these organs that are challenged.

Thus dental care is extremely important. Compliant cats whose teeth are not too bad will tolerate manual cleaning on an outpatient basis once or twice a year as recommended by your vet. Many cats however especially those needing extractions require a general anaesthetic and ultrasonic scaling. Antibiotics and fluid therapy may be also needed to optimise the cat's recovery.

Training cats at a young age to chew chicken wings or necks is a very effective way of keeping their teeth clean. Also various dry food formulations eg Hills T/D are quite effective at keeping mouths in good condition.

There are various prescription diets for cats with CKD which slow the progression of the disease. These in conjunction with some appropriate medications can prolong the life of your pet.

Feline Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is an excessive production of the thyroid hormone by the thyroid glands which are situated in the neck area overlying the trachea (windpipe). The cause of this overproduction is unknown.

The disease was first documented some 25 years ago and has become the most common endocrine (hormonal) disorder of cats, surpassing even diabetes. It is primarily a disease of older cats (mean age 13 years). Because thyroid hormone controls the rate of body metabolism, many of the body systems are affected.

The most commonly observed symptom is a voracious appetite. I have known a cat to eat four 400gram cans of food a day, most of which was voided as soft or sloppy faeces. Despite the massive appetite, hyperthyroid cats lose weight. Other common signs include vomiting, increased thirst, hyperactivity and increased vocalisation, especially at night.

Upon veterinary examination, 70% of these cats have enlarged thyroids which can be palpated. Heart rate is often increased and a murmur may be audible on auscultation with a stethoscope. Diagnosis is made by a blood test of the circulating T4 hormone. Because these cats are often elderly, treatment can be complicated by the concurrent presence of kidney or heart disease. Measurement of your cat's blood pressure is an important and relatively simple procedure

There are three treatment options:

1. Surgical removal of the thyroid glands. This is complicated by the fact that embedded in the thyroid glands are the para-thyroid glands which control calcium metabolism. Seaforth Veterinary Hospital does not recommend this procedure.
2. Intravenous administration of radioactive iodine which destroys part of the thyroid tissue. This is a specialist procedure which is quite expensive. Cats are hospitalised for some time after treatment, as they are radioactive. Both these treatments have the disadvantage of being irreversible.
3. Treatment with a drug called Carbimazole which is given in tablet form twice daily. The advantage here is that the T4 levels can be monitored and adjusted accordingly. Also if any kidney disease is exacerbated, the drug can be withdrawn. The disadvantage is that the treatment is ongoing for the rest of the cat's life.
4. Methimazole is a drug that can be applied in paste form to the inside of the cat's ears.

With regular monitoring, cats can live many more years, gain weight and live happy lives.

ARTHRITIS

As with every other species cats can develop Degenerative Joint Disease (DJD) as they get older. It is my belief that the incidence of DJD in cats is more prevalent in the forelegs (unlike dogs where hips & knees are a major problem). My theory is that it is because cats have a predilection for jumping down from great heights thus causing concussion damage to the forelimbs. Historically Non Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDS) used in other species including humans were toxic to cats. However there are now preparations that are safe to use in cats although my recommendation is to use them intermittently. So if your cat can't jump on the bed anymore, walks very stiffly or has trouble getting up, help is at hand.

DIABETES

This is quite a common problem and unfortunately my beloved Burmese are over-represented. As with humans obesity can be a contributing problem.

Increased thirst, urination and often rapid weight loss are suspicious signs. A positive glucose test in urine (often hard to get) is highly suspicious. However, for a definitive diagnosis and calculation of appropriate insulin dose, a fasting

blood glucose level is required. Insulin is given twice daily. Most people shudder at this prospect but soon lose their apprehension after a few days.

In my experience oral hypoglycaemics are unsatisfactory. Dietary change and weight loss is a great help with some cats actually losing their diabetic state after a period of time.

EUTHANASIA

Despite all our efforts, at some stage a decision has to be made as to whether your cat has a satisfactory quality of life. I have often thought that my profession is lucky in that we can make this decision and not have to prolong life for the sake of it.

I firmly believe it is inhumane to let a cat starve itself to death. Cats with failed kidneys often become so toxic they refuse to eat. Intractable vomiting is also very distressing for all.

Cats who can't walk – I believe non-ambulatory cats are not a viable proposition. They are often in pain and become urinary and faecally incontinent. Cats are inherently clean creatures and it is distressing to see them otherwise.