Treatment Options for Feline Hyperthyroidism

For her first 12 years, I jokingly referred to Callie, my calico cat, as a “cheap date” because during her lifetime, all I needed to spend on her was for routine needs such as food, treats, bedding, toys and annual veterinary exams. She was the poster cat for feline health, except for being a bit chubby.

But shortly after her 12th birthday, I noticed that she was slimming down. It’s nature to want to take credit for this sudden “fit feline” look, but I knew unexplained weight loss often signals a silent health condition. Paul Richieri, DVM, my veterinarian who operates Melrose Veterinary Hospital in Vista, Calif., confirmed my concerns after palpating her neck area and feeling an enlarged thyroid gland. Callie was diagnosed with hyperthyroidism, a disease that strikes middle-aged and senior cats. It is caused by a benign tumor in one or both of a cat’s thyroid glands, which in turn, causes an overproduction of thyroid hormones. Unchecked, it can trigger hypothyroid cardiomyopathy (a disease that causes a thickening of the heart) and damage the kidneys and eyes.

Hyperthyroidism ranks as the most common glandular disease in cats, and typically affects cats 10 years and older. Cats with this disease may display some or all of these symptoms: increased appetite coupled with unexplained weight loss, irritability or nervousness, frequent vomiting, excessive thirst, diarrhea and lethargy.

Three treatment options are available: medication, surgery and radioactive iodine.

Medication

Medication involves twice-a-day doses of a drug called methimazole, available in pill or topical form. Cats receiving this drug must be monitored by veterinarians every few months to ensure that side effects such as vomiting, anemia or lethargy do not occur. The medication is designed to keep the thyroid glands in remission, but does not affect the tumor.

Surgery

You can opt to have the thyroid gland surgically removed; however, complications are possible, including damage to the parathyroid glands located near the thyroid. In addition, cats with uncontrolled hyperthyroidism are regarded as potential anesthetic risks. Finally, the procedure needs to be performed by a surgeon skilled in performing thyroidectomies to ensure the thyroid has been completely removed without complications. Costs for anesthesia, surgery and post-operative care average $1,500, depending on where you live.

Radioactive Iodine

Radioactive iodine is regarded as the treatment of choice for curing this condition. It involves giving an injection of radioactive iodine (R131) under the skin. The iodine travels to the thyroid gland where it disrupts the function of the thyroid cells, preventing them from releasing excessive amounts of thyroid hormone thyroxine (T4). The T4 levels return to normal and the cat is cured. The cat is required by law to stay quarantined for a short period of time at veterinary specialty hospitals.

“In my opinion, radioactive iodine treatment is curative, non-invasive and very effective,” said Arnold Plotnick, DVM, ACVIM, who operates Manhattan Cat Specialists in New York City and serves as medical editor for Catnip, a monthly newsletter affiliated with Tufts University’s veterinary school. “It is costly, usually between $1,200 and $1,600, but does not require post-procedure medication. This treatment is safe with a nearly 100-percent cure rate.”

I chose the radioactive iodine option for Callie. During her week stay at a veterinary imaging hospital, I received daily updates on her recovery and was able to watch her through a web cam accessible on my computer. When she returned home, she displayed renewed kitten-like energy and was declared healthy and cured.

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