

Urinary Problems in Cats

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Cystitis, Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease (FLUTD), Feline Urologic Syndrome (FUS), urinary obstruction or blockage--- these are all part of a larger problem that commonly affects our cats. Signs include blood in the urine, straining to urinate, painful urination, going in and out of the litter box frequently, urinating outside of the litter box, and at its worst being unable to pass urine. The problem is frequently a chronic, recurring issue for many cats. Complete urinary obstruction is a true emergency and will not be covered here. The purpose of this article is to review some of the causes of urinary problems in cats and to offer some suggestions as to how to help many of these cats.

Causes

Causes of urinary problems are many and varied; each cat might have its own combination of reasons. Some cats have problems with crystals, which act as sludge and/or irritant in the bladder. Crystals can be caused by a combination of diet, urine pH, and urine concentration. Crystals can converge to form stones, which are a less common cause of urinary problems. Infection, although uncommon, can cause bladder problems. Less recognized causes include allergies (to grains, chicken, etc.), stress, emotions, and decreased water intake.

Approach

The basic approach to cystitis is to evaluate and address each of the potential causes. A meat-based diet will help cats with cystitis by creating acidic urine (plant-based proteins will tend to create undesirable alkaline urine) in which struvite crystals cannot form. A high moisture diet such as fresh or canned food will help prevent crystals by diluting the urine. Encouraging additional water intake by providing a fountain or other source which the cat enjoys will also help. Urinalysis and either radiographs or ultrasound might be considered to rule out stones or infection.

In my experience, it is just as important to address the possibilities of allergies and stress. Most of the cats I have seen with cystitis are either very fearful or aggressive/dominant. Many cats with cystitis are also experiencing stress such as

a move, new people in the house, or problems interacting with other cats either inside or outside the household.

Solutions

Conventional therapy often includes fluids to dilute the urine, anti-inflammatories to decrease inflammation in the bladder, and antibiotics to treat any possible infection. This approach will likely get a cat through an acute episode, but does not help prevent recurrences and so is not a good long-term approach.

Diet is the first step in any program for feline urinary problems. A meat-based, high moisture diet is paramount. I would avoid kibble foods, even if they are specifically designed for bladder problems. Cats are pure carnivores, and kibble (which requires a high carbohydrate component to form a kibble, whether grain, pea, or potato) is just not what cats were meant to eat. Canned foods are better than kibble, but I would much prefer a fresh diet. Some veterinarians recommend avoiding chicken initially, as chicken can be a common allergen for cats. ZiwiPeak has a line of meat-based venison diets. Their air-dried formula can be soaked to provide an ideal and close-to-raw option for urinary problems.

Controlling stress is an extremely important aspect to address for these cats. It may seem strange to think that your cat is stressed, but cats can show stress in funny ways. Hiding, over-grooming, slinking or skulking around, being easily startled, increased aggression- these are all potential signs of stress in your cat. Some of the most important ways to reduce stress are addressing species appropriate environment (number of cats in the household, creation of safe spaces, number of litter boxes, type of litter, placement of litter boxes, availability of high hiding places, exercise, scratching posts), exercise, Feliway/Comfort Zone (a pheromone product for stress reduction), and flower essences (to address issues such as fear, jealousy, anger, neediness, inability to accept change, etc.). Talk with your veterinarian or behaviorist for more specific advice.

Some other alternative therapies to consider include homeopathy (berberis, cantharis, apis, lycopodium, solidago compositum), herbs such as Tinkle Tonic (Animals Apawthecary), Bladder Clear (World Herbs) and polyporus combination, acupuncture, and biofeedback.

Summary:

Meat-based, high-moisture diet free of preservatives and additives, possibly hypoallergenic

Good water source

Address stress- Feliway, flower essences, environment

Consider homeopathy, acupuncture, herbs