



What is Asthma?

Asthma is a lung condition characterized by narrowing of the airways due to spasm, swelling, and excess mucous production. It affects approximately 1% of the cat population. The most common signs are coughing (sometimes mistaken for hairballs), wheezing, and difficult breathing (exaggerated and/or open mouth breathing or panting). The pattern of clinical signs varies from intermittent periods of coughing and wheezing to acute life-threatening bouts with difficult breathing. Many cats appear normal between episodes. Even mildly affected cats can experience acute life threatening airway constriction (asthma attacks) and can suffer changes that scar their lungs over time.

How Do We Diagnose Asthma?

Your history and your cat's signs may suggest a diagnosis of asthma but there are other diseases that mimic or complicate this condition. These include heart failure, heartworms (if your cat has been outside Washington State), lungworms, toxoplasmosis, bacterial and viral infections, and certain cancers. The diagnostic process begins by performing chest x-rays, heartworm testing (when indicated), and appropriate blood tests. A bronchial wash provides a more definitive diagnosis. This requires light anesthesia and sampling cells from the lower airways that are then analyzed by a pathologist.

How Do We Treat Asthma?

Conventional treatment for asthma is a combination of orally administered medications, usually corticosteroids (cortisone) with or without bronchodilators (airway dilators). The goal of treating asthmatic cats with oral medications is to effectively control the disease with minimal systemic side effects. Many asthmatic cats are effectively managed in this manner. In recent years, as an alternative to oral treatments, veterinarians have used inhalers to deliver corticosteroids and bronchodilators to the lungs. The AeroKat[®] Feline Aerosol Chamber, an inhaler spacer specially designed for cats, provides accurate and effective delivery of asthma medications from inhalers. Please see our handout "Inhalation Therapy for Treatment of Feline Asthma." While some owners feel they cannot adequately treat with inhaled medications or afford the inhaled treatments, most cats tolerate them well and respond with fewer systemic side effects. We encourage you to discuss this option with us. Asthma is a controllable but not curable disease and most patients require lifelong treatment. Because asthma is likely an allergic condition, we advise you to reduce your cat's stress, to avoid environmental triggers like smoke from cigarettes and wood burning stoves, air fresheners, hairspray and other household sprays, and to change the cat litter to a dust-free product. Weight reduction in overweight cats may also prove beneficial.

Follow-up:

Once treatment has been initiated, we will recommend appropriate follow-up. Over a period of weeks to months, we will taper the medications (oral and/or inhaled) to achieve the lowest effective doses for your cat's condition. We adjust the therapy by monitoring signs and chest x-rays. It is extremely important that you advise us of any problems and adhere to the recommended follow-up schedule.

In the case of life threatening attacks (severe respiratory distress, coughing, open mouth breathing or panting), immediately contact:

The Cat Doctor Veterinary Center at (253) 874-2012

For After Hours Care:

Summit Veterinary Referral Center: 2505 S. 80th Street, Tacoma, WA 98409, (253) 983-1114

Blue Pearl Vet: 4208 Lind Ave SW, Renton, WA 98057, (425) 496-1000

Blue Pearl Vet: 5608 S. Durango St., Tacoma, WA 98409, (253) 474-0791