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Coughing in Cats

What to consider when cats cough:

Just as we humans cough to clear our throats, likewise our cats cough to clear out irritants from an air passage. Cats may cough when a particle of food goes down the windpipe (trachea) rather than the food tube (esophagus) or when a grass seed is inhaled. In such situations, coughing is a practical and harmless solution to a ticklish problem. Because of this, if your cat coughs occasionally without distress, you probably don't have to be too concerned. Sometimes, though, a cat coughs because something *is* wrong. And veterinary help should be sought if your cat is coughing more than just occasionally. A chronic cough (one that persists over several weeks); frequent bouts of violent coughing; or coughing accompanied by wheezing or labored breathing (dyspnea) are all signs of respiratory problems that require immediate attention. Often owners will come to us with coughing cats saying they don't know what is going on, but it sounds like their cat is repeatedly trying to get up a hairball-- but nothing ever comes up. If your cat coughs and coughs and nothing comes up, its probably *not* a hairball. More likely your cat has a lung problem.

The causes of respiratory problems in cats are varied--viruses, bacteria, fungi, parasites, allergies, heart disease and tumors. However, not all of the respiratory problems caused by these conditions are typically accompanied by a cough. Upper-respiratory-tract problems--often viral--tend to manifest as sneezes, snuffles, watery eyes and runny noses. It is the lower-respiratory -tract problems--feline asthma, chronic bronchitis, or parasites (lungworms, or heartworms)--that more often produce a cough.

Getting to the Bottom of a Cough:

Diagnosing respiratory disease can be something of a challenge. Cats can be remarkably stoic and have advance respiratory disease before showing any signs of a problem.

Diagnosing begins with a physical examination that includes listening to the cat's chest with a stethoscope. X-rays are the next step, although depending on the severity of the disease, X-rays may or may not confirm an some conditions such as asthma. To confirm and determine the cause of some lung problems such as bronchitis, your veterinarian may need to obtain cells and cultures from your cat's lungs tract for analysis. This usually involves sedating your cat and performing what is called a tracheal wash.

Your veterinarian will probably also recommend taking a blood sample to obtain a complete blood count (CBC) to help pinpoint the cause of the problem. A specialized fecal filter test--such as the Baermann technique--reveals the presence of lungworm larvae or eggs in the stool. A blood tests are used to look for Heartworm disease.

Although accurate diagnosis is crucial to effective long-term treatment, awaiting results can take time. So, when a cat is in distress, most veterinarians will immediately treat the cat to relieve the distress while waiting to confirm its precise cause.

Although most lower respiratory tract disease cannot be cured, they can be controlled with medication. Even a cat that suffers a life-threatening asthma attack can go on to live a normal. The key to effective treatment is getting a diagnosis in a timely manner.

Specific Causes of Coughs

Feline Asthma:

"No one knows precisely what causes asthma, but some of the things that make it worse are:

Dusts (House Dust, Carpet Powders)

Dusty Cat Litter (use Dr. Elsie's Respiratory Relief Clumping) Smoke (Cigarettes, Fire Places, Wood Stoves)

Aerosols (Hair Sprays, Room Deodorizers, Perfumes)

Pollen

Feline asthma or allergic bronchitis—a condition similar to bronchial asthma in people, causes a constriction of the airways, making breathing difficult and resulting in a cough. In asthmatic cats, exposure to allergens (allergy-producing substances) or irritants (such as cigarette smoke) fires up the immune system's defenses, leading to an inflammatory reaction in the lower respiratory tract. This reaction causes, among other things bronchospasm that results in constriction to the airways.

The inflamed and constricted airways may also become blocked with mucus, adding to a cat's breathing difficulties.

Some cats have a mild form of asthma that manifests itself as a chronic cough or even as lethargy, disinterest in food, or social apathy. Other cats, however, are prone to acute attacks during which they experience severe respiratory difficulty. If your cat is half-sitting, half-crouched and having obvious difficulty breathing—with its elbows bent and turned away from its body, its mouth open, its tongue or lips tinged blue, and its demeanor anxious—immediately rush your cat to the hospital for emergency care. The veterinarian will give your cat oxygen and injections to help it breathe.

Chronic Bronchitis:

Chronic bronchitis, which can look like asthma, is not the same story. The cause of chronic bronchitis is not an allergy, but a virus or bacteria. If left untreated, chronic bronchitis causes permanent damage to a cat's breathing apparatus. The standard treatment is a course of antibiotics targeted to the agent causing the disease. Cats that have both chronic bronchitis and asthma (not uncommon) require treatment for both conditions.

Lungworms and Heartworms

Lungworms (*Aelurostrongylus abstrusus*) usually produce either mild or no signs of disease in cats. The standard treatment is deworming the cat. Disease caused by heartworms (*Dirofilaria immitis*) manifests differently in cats than in dogs and is considerably more difficult to diagnose and treat in cats than in dogs. Luckily, it is not as common in cats as dogs.

may include blood tests, laboratory cultures of a wash sample from the lower respiratory tract, endoscopic examination and radiography. The cat m

How Can a Cough be Treated?

Treatment options depend on the cause of a cough. The long-term nonemergency treatment for asthmatic cats includes a regimen of anti-inflammatory medications--corticosteroids (such as prednisone or prednisolone)--administered in combination with bronchodilating medication (such as theophylline). Your cat may also benefit from learning to use an inhaler (www.aerocat.com). Although it can be very difficult to identify specifically what triggers an allergic reaction, some of the known allergens to avoid are outlined above. The good news is that even though asthma is a life-long condition that requires treatment indefinitely, most cats can live a fairly normal life.

Chronic bronchitis treatment often requires the use of antibiotics, while lungworms have to be removed with dewormers. Unfortunately, safe medications to remove heartworms from cats just do not exist at this time. Symptomatic treatment with medications to control the cough is often the only option.

--Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM

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