Hepatic Lipidosis

Internal Medicine Service

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What is Hepatic Lipidosis?

Hepatic lipidosis is a common cause of potentially reversible liver failure in cats. The disease is due to the excess accumulation of fat in the liver. The liver is responsible for a variety of important functions, including the metabolism of carbohydrates and fats, the synthesis of proteins and vitamins, the storage of vitamins and iron, the production of substances necessary for blood clotting, and the removal or breakdown of toxins.

Because the liver is involved in many crucial biologic functions, a cat with liver disease may show a wide variety of symptoms. These may include lethargy, anorexia (loss of appetite), weight loss, weakness, jaundice (yellowing of the skin, eyes and gums), vomiting, diarrhea, and behavioral changes.

Hepatic lipidosis is just one of many liver diseases which can cause the clinical signs listed above. Hepatic lipidosis can be the primary problem or it can be secondary to another disease process. Possible primary disease processes include inflammatory bowel disease, other liver disease, cancer, pancreatitis, or social interaction problems (i.e. introduction of a new pet or other stresses at home). Factors which may be associated with the onset of hepatic lipidosis include stress, obesity, anorexia, a change in diet, nutritional deficiencies, diabetes, and hyperthyroidism. The typical cat with hepatic lipidosis is middle-aged, overweight, has a poor appetite, and has recently lost a significant amount of body weight.

Diagnosis

The suspicion that a cat is suffering from liver disease is confirmed by physical examination, a thorough history including diet and medications, comprehensive blood work, and abdominal ultrasound. The definitive diagnosis of hepatic lipidosis requires visualization of fat globules in the liver cells; this can only be accomplished through needle aspiration or biopsy of the liver.

Treatment

Regardless of the cause, the basic treatment for hepatic lipidosis is the same. Many cats will be dehydrated and completely anorexic when brought to the hospital. Intravenous fluids are used to correct the dehydration. Most cats with hepatic lipidosis refuse to eat, yet the only way to reverse the process of fat accumulation within the liver is through aggressive feeding. This supplies your cat with his or her full caloric requirements. Force-feeding your cat is an option, but most cats are not very cooperative and meeting their caloric requirements is difficult at best. Cats also seem to develop food aversions quite easily, and the unpleasant experience of force-feeding may further delay your cat's return to self-feeding.

Placement of a feeding tube (percutaneous gastrostomy tube or esophagostomy tube) into the stomach or neck, respectively, is the most satisfactory methods to manage feedings. The percutaneous gastrostomy tube is placed using an endoscope and requires a short duration of anesthesia. An esophagostomy tube also requires a short amount of anesthesia and is placed into your cat's esophagus through a small hole in the neck. Some cats require supportive care, including vitamin K to help them clot their blood, for a period of time before they are stable enough to undergo these procedures.

Hepatic Lipidosis continued...

Treatment continued...

Both options allow us and you to ensure that your cat is receiving its full caloric requirement with a minimum of stress and fuss. A specially formulated recovery diet can be fed through the feeding tube for the entire time it takes for your cat to recover from the hepatic lipidosis. If necessary, the feeding tube can safely remain in place for several weeks to months. A feeding tube allows your pet to return home where you can perform the feedings and give medications in a less stressful way.

The expected hospitalization for a cat presenting with severe hepatic lipidosis can be up to 7-10 days. During this period of time, we will correct the dehydration, monitor for any electrolyte abnormalities that may occur, and begin reintroduction of food to your cat. As these cats have not eaten for some time, reintroduction of food must be done slowly so as to not overwhelm their system. Once your cat is stable, off intravenous fluid therapy, and receiving most of its calculated caloric requirements we will set up a time for your cat to go home. A discharge appointment takes approximately 30-60 minutes. During that time, we will go through any medications your cat may require, demonstrate how tube feedings are done, and answer any other questions you may have.

You will be expected to bring your cat in to see your veterinarian for regular rechecks. These might be more frequent in the beginning and will decrease in frequency as your cat recovers. Some feeding tubes require bandaging that will need to be changed every couple days. Many owners learn to do these bandage changes at home and monitor for infections. As liver function recovers, appetite will gradually improve. Expected recovery time is typically 6-12 weeks, with an average time of 8 weeks. When your cat is totally self-feeding for 2 weeks without any weight loss, the feeding tube can be removed. Recurrence of primary hepatic lipidosis is rare, and many cats that survive go on to live normal lives. Some cats have other contributing diseases that require specific long-term treatment.