

Pancreatitis in Cats

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BASIC INFORMATION

Description

The pancreas is a flat, thin organ located in the front of the abdomen, near the stomach, that contains two major types of cells. One group of cells (*endocrine pancreas*) produces hormones (insulin, glucagon) that regulate blood sugar, and the other group (*exocrine pancreas*) produces digestive enzymes that are released into the intestine to break down food.

Pancreatitis is inflammation of the exocrine part of the pancreas. When the pancreas becomes inflamed, it becomes painful and swollen and may affect the stomach, small intestine, and parts of the liver. Swelling and irritation of the stomach, small intestine, pancreas, and parts of the liver are responsible for most of the clinical signs seen.

Causes

In most cats, the cause of pancreatitis is unknown. Many cats with pancreatitis also have inflammatory small bowel disease (IBD) and/or inflammation of the liver and gall bladder (cholangiohepatitis). An underlying problem may lead to any or all of these diseases in a particular cat. Many cats with IBD or cholangiohepatitis are sensitive to the types of protein in their diet, and the inflammation may represent a dietary allergy in some cats.

Two forms of pancreatitis exist: acute and chronic pancreatitis. In the cat, chronic pancreatitis is far more common than acute pancreatitis. Most cats with pancreatitis have a long history of clinical signs that are often vague or misleading.

Clinical Signs

The most common sign in the cat is lethargy, followed by a poor appetite. Vomiting, dehydration, and a painful abdomen on palpation are seen occasionally, particularly during flare-ups. It is very common for signs of chronic pancreatitis to come and go in the cat; even when the cat seems to feel better, the pancreas can still be inflamed. Some cats with chronic pancreatitis develop diabetes mellitus if the insulin-producing cells are damaged. Bouts of chronic pancreatitis make the diabetes more difficult to regulate.

Diagnostic Tests

Reaching a diagnosis of pancreatitis in the cat can be quite complicated. Your veterinarian may recommend several types of blood tests and x-rays:

- Routine blood tests are used to look for other diseases that cause similar signs.
- A specialized test measures a form of digestive enzyme in the bloodstream that is increased with inflammation of the

pancreas. Your veterinarian may combine this test, called the *feline specific pancreatic lipase test* (SpecfPL), with other function tests of the small intestine.

An abdominal ultrasound is commonly done to look for an enlarged, swollen pancreas. The pancreas of the cat can be difficult to see on ultrasound, so your veterinarian may refer your cat to a veterinary specialist for this examination.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

Cats with acute pancreatitis often require hospitalization for fluid therapy and medications to treat pain and to stop vomiting. Some may need insertion of a feeding tube to provide necessary nutrition. Severe acute pancreatitis is rare in the cat, but it can be life-threatening and can deteriorate rapidly if not treated promptly.

Many cats with chronic pancreatitis do not need to be hospitalized. In many of these cats the underlying problem is a dietary intolerance or allergy, so a diet change may be necessary. Your veterinarian can suggest a novel diet, based on the history of diet types that your cat has previously eaten.

If the cat does not respond to the new diet, anti-inflammatory medications may be tried. These drugs must be used with care, because they can have significant side effects. Steroid medications are particularly problematic for cats with diabetes mellitus.

Chronic pancreatitis can be a frustrating disease to control, and several different treatment approaches and fine-tuning of the therapies may be required.

Follow-up Care

Frequency and number of follow-up visits vary depending on the severity and frequency of the clinical signs. Remember that many cats show little or no signs of their chronic pancreatitis except during flare-ups. Repeating the SpecfPL blood test is often the only way to know whether the treatments are truly helping. Cats that require glucocorticoid steroid drugs must be monitored closely for the development of complications, particularly diabetes mellitus.

Prognosis

Prognosis for cats with pancreatitis requiring hospitalization is difficult to predict. Some cats die of this disease, even with the best possible care. Prognosis for cats with chronic pancreatitis is generally good, particularly if a change of diet is all that is needed to control the inflammation. Your pet must be monitored closely for the development of complications, particularly diabetes mellitus.