

Inflammatory Bowel Disease in Cats

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BASIC INFORMATION

Description

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is the name given to several common conditions in which the walls of the gastrointestinal tract (gut) become inflamed. Clinical signs vary depending on the part of the gut that is inflamed. IBD in cats is not the same as irritable bowel syndrome in people, and treatments designed for the control of human irritable bowel syndrome do not help IBD in cats.

Causes

The cause of IBD in most cats is never completely determined. Dietary intolerances or allergies seem to play an important part in triggering IBD in many cats. The cat may be allergic to a particular part of the diet (usually the protein source) or may develop intolerance to one of the many different types of bacteria that live in the gut.

Clinical Signs

Clinical signs of this disease are highly very variable. The most common signs are poor appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, and/or weight loss. Some cats develop dry, scaly skin and matting of the fur, particularly if they have secondary vitamin deficiencies. Signs can vary in type and severity from day to day. In some cats, excessive gas, bloating and flatulence, or even constipation can occur. Clinical examination sometimes reveals a thickened intestinal tract on palpation of the abdomen, but this is not a reliable finding.

Diagnostic Tests

Because the clinical signs of inflammatory bowel disease are very vague and can arise with many other diseases, a large number of tests may be necessary to reach a diagnosis:

- Initially, routine laboratory tests and fecal examination for parasites may be done. If another disease is found, it should be treated, but its presence does not mean that IBD is not also present.
- More specialized tests of intestinal function are commonly recommended when small intestinal disease is suspected. These tests measure the amounts of certain vitamins and digestive enzymes in the bloodstream and are run by specialized laboratories, so results may not be available for several days.
- Abdominal x-rays and/or an ultrasound are useful in searching for other diseases, but they cannot rule out a diagnosis of IBD.
- The most definitive way to diagnose IBD is through biopsy of the intestinal tract. Depending on the part of the gut that is

affected, biopsy samples may be obtained with the use of an endoscope (a flexible tube passed into the intestines through the animal's mouth) or abdominal exploratory surgery.

- Typically, all or most of the laboratory tests are performed before endoscopy or surgery is recommended.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

Often the treatment for IBD is as simple as changing the diet, because many cats have a dietary intolerance or allergy as the underlying condition. The new diet is either specifically manufactured to be hypoallergenic or is composed of a completely new source of protein (for instance, lamb instead of chicken). The decision whether to use a hypoallergenic diet or a new protein source depends on the number of different diets your pet has consumed in the past.

Usually, if the new diet is going to be beneficial, an improvement in clinical signs is seen within 14 days.

If no improvement occurs with diet changes alone, anti-inflammatory drugs, such as steroids, may be given. If your cat is placed on steroid medications, it is very important to consult with your veterinarian prior to giving other anti-inflammatory medications, such as aspirin or meloxicam.

Some cats with IBD develop severe vitamin deficiencies that must be treated with injectable vitamin supplements.

Follow-up Care

Follow-up examinations and repeated laboratory testing are often used to assess response to treatment and make adjustments in medications. If no or little improvement occurs within 2-3 weeks following a diet change or treatment with steroids, the dose of steroids may be increased, or other immune suppressive drugs may be added. After all signs have disappeared, it may be possible to slowly taper the medications, based on the recommendations of your veterinarian. If drugs are tapered, notify your veterinarian if any signs recur.

Prognosis

Prognosis for most cats is good, because many show substantial improvement with diet changes and anti-inflammatory drugs. Some cats have more severe disease that is difficult to control, and in these cases the prognosis is poor to guarded (uncertain). Occasionally, cats with IBD develop intestinal lymphoma and require more aggressive therapy.