



Cat Watch

Expert information on medicine, behavior and health from a world leader in veterinary medicine



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IN THE NEWS ...

Hospitals Put Out the Welcome Mat for Pets

A growing number of hospitals around the country are prescribing what they call "pet medicine" to boost patients' spirits. They're allowing family cats and dogs to visit. North Shore University Hospital and the Hospice Inn, both on Long Island, even let pets stay with patients around the clock.

Among participants in this trend are the University of Iowa Hospital and Clinics, two Mayo Clinic-related hospitals and more than a dozen other medical centers. Requirements usually include a doctor's approval and proof the pet is healthy and vaccinated. Cats must be taken in and out of the hospitals in carriers.

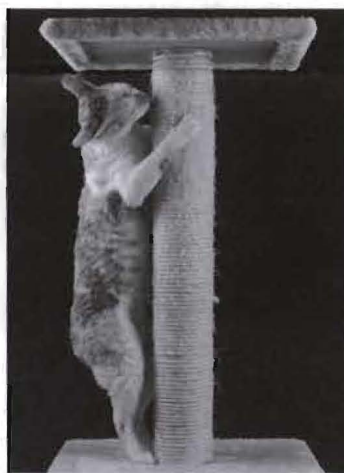
Questions were raised about possible health risks from pets, but Rush University Medical Center in Chicago decided that the benefits to patients outweighed the risks, with one observer there concluding that the visits allow patients to get in touch with a part of their lives that is often lost in the hospital. ♦

The Many Reasons They Love to Scratch

They're marking territory and grooming their nails — destroying the sofa is merely incidental

Scratching is a normal yet complex behavior in cats that can damage both the house and the cat-owner bond. Understanding the basis of destructive scratching is the first step in preventing it.

A preliminary study at the University of Pisa in Italy, examining the variables in cats' use of scratching posts, found what seems to be self-evident: Having a scratching post, or not having one, made a difference in



The opportunity to stretch is an added benefit.

the cat's behavior. If there is one, the cat will use it.

Training Needed.

"It's good to know that a scratching post is not just an ornament," says animal behaviorist Katherine H. Houpt, DVM, Ph.D., professor emeritus at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. However, as owners who have bought scratching posts have learned, sometimes they need to train the cat to use them.

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Cold Laser Therapy Gains Acceptance

Its benefits have yet to be scientifically validated, but experience suggests it can treat pain and inflammation

Don't be surprised if your cat's veterinarian dons special dark goggles in the exam room and applies a handheld wand to targeted areas on your cat's body to speed up healing from surgery or ease the pain of arthritis. The latest tool in pain management — called cold laser therapy — is quickly gaining acceptance from veterinarians in teaching hospitals and small animal practices across the country.

The medical treatment, also called low-level laser therapy, was first introduced in human medicine nearly 50 years

ago. It has been used in animals for about 10 years, but only in the past few years has its popularity grown.

Anecdotal Reports. While the effectiveness of this mode of therapy has not been fully evaluated by controlled studies in veterinary patients, its benefits may be considerable judging by the anecdotal reports.

Today, veterinarians are using low-level lasers to treat a variety of conditions, including asthma, renal and thyroid diseases, arthritis and other joint pain, open wounds that are slow to heal, inflammatory

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CatWatch

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SHORT TAKES

The Message Worth Repeating: Leave No Pet Behind in a Disaster

At one point when rushing rivers flooded Colorado towns and farms earlier this year, 2,000 stranded people and 500 pets were evacuated by helicopter. The swift, rising water caused loss of life and damage to 2,380 acres in the state. The American Humane Association and other organizations on the ground rescued hundreds of pets and livestock.

"Floods are among the most terrifying and destructive of natural disasters," says Robin Ganzert, Ph.D., President and CEO of the association, which is devoted to protecting children and animals. It offers these lifesaving tips in the event a flood is forecast:

- ◆ Microchip pets or put a tag on their collars with your name, address and cell phone number. (Some experts advise doing both.) Gather their vaccination papers and photos of them in case you become separated and need to identify them if they're rescued and taken to a shelter.
- ◆ Have an emergency kit ready and evacuate as early as possible with pet food, medications, water, leashes and cat carriers. Stock extra pet supplies in your car.
- ◆ Plan routes to higher elevations and a safe destination. Avoid routes near bridges. At least 50 were destroyed or damaged in Colorado. Plan a safe walking route, too.
- ◆ Don't leave pets home alone. Disasters can change quickly, and you may not be able to return.

After a flood, be cautious walking on higher ground. Snakes, insects and other animals may have found refuge there. Give your cats time to re-orient. Familiar scents may be altered and cause confusion.

For more information, please refer to "When a Sudden Disaster Strikes" in the July 2013 issue of *CatWatch*.



Members of the American Humane Association Red Star rescue team inch along a ravine to reach a cat in a flooded house in Colorado. They made it and successfully brought the cat out.

American Humane Association

Fearless Mice?

It's well known that exposure to the the parasite *Toxoplasma*, which is spread through cat feces, can cause spontaneous abortion in pregnant women and pose a health threat to immune-compromised people.

Now, University of California, Berkeley graduate student Wendy Ingram has uncovered a new development: Mice infected with *Toxoplasma* lose their fear of cats, and the parasite's effect seems to be long lasting.

"The fearless behavior in mice persists long after the mouse recovers from the flu-like symptoms of toxoplasmosis and for months after the parasitic infection is cleared from the body," according to research published in the journal *PLoS ONE*.

"Even when the parasite is cleared and it's no longer in the brains of the animals, some kind of ... long-term behavior change has occurred," Ingram says.

Researchers haven't identified the mechanism responsible for the change, but Ingram speculates that the parasite could damage the smell center of the brain so that the odor of cat urine can't be detected. The parasite could also alter neurons involved in memory and learning.

While earlier studies showed mice lose their fear of bobcat urine for several weeks after infection, Ingram has found that the three most common strains of *Toxoplasma gondii* make mice less fearful of cats for at least four months. ♦

New Rules for CPR Save More Lives

They call for immediate action to begin compressions — not to check for a pulse

For years, pet owners were instructed to first check for a pulse before using cardiopulmonary resuscitation to revive a cat. Now, however, new guidelines from emergency care veterinarians advise that if you find your cat unresponsive and motionless, immediately start chest compressions. The reason: This protocol simply saves more lives.

"If a pet's heart does stop, time is of the essence," says Gretchen Schoeffler, DVM, DACVECC, Emergency and Critical Care Section Chief at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "You need to take action, especially if the nearest veterinary clinic is 15 or 20 minutes away."

To ensure a greater chance for survival, the guidelines from the American College of Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care urge action rather than an assessment. "Evidence shows that every time you stop compressions, you decrease the chance of survival," says Elisa Mazzaferro, DVM, Ph.D., a board-certified emergency and critical care specialist at Cornell Uni-

versity Veterinary Specialists in Stamford, Conn. "The mindset is that there is enough oxygen in the bloodstream so that compressions of the chest alone will circulate enough oxygen to keep an animal alive."

Chest Compressions. The revised technique calls for 30 immediate chest compressions at a rate of 100 to 120 compressions per minute. That equals 15 to 18 seconds for the 30 compressions. Follow with two quick breaths through the cat's nostrils. Then immediately resume another cycle of 30 compressions and two breaths. Continue these cycles until your cat is resuscitated, and he's breathing on his own or moving, or until you obtain professional help.

If you're doing CPR alone, you may find it difficult to track both the compressions and the timing. Instead, count aloud as you perform 30 fast-paced chest compressions followed by breathing two breaths of air directly into the cat's nose.



The two-handed compression technique with interlocking fingers can be used on large cats.

Then you can repeat the 30 compressions and two breaths of air. Do not stop to take your cat's pulse — leave that for a veterinary professional. "Every time you stop compressions, you decrease the chance for survival," Dr. Schoeffler says.

Seek Help. Injuries and illnesses, such as choking on a toy, being hit by a car or suffering from a chronic heart condition, can cause cessation of a heartbeat in cats. After starting CPR, seek veterinary help as soon as you can. If possible, have an individual call the nearest clinic to alert the staff of your arrival and ask for advice. If you're alone, use the speaker phone to call to continue CPR.

(continued on bottom of page 7)

SIX QUICK STEPS FOR RESUSCITATION

If you believe your cat's heart has stopped beating, start chest compressions immediately:

- ◆ Open the mouth and ensure nothing is obstructing the airway. This should take no more than five seconds.
- ◆ Lay your cat on his side on a firm surface.
- ◆ Perform chest compressions directly over the heart. The heart lies under the ribs where the elbow naturally falls against the body wall. For small-to-average size cats, you may use one-handed compressions. Wrap one hand around the chest with the thumb over the heart on one side and the first two to three fingers over the heart on the other side. Wrap the hand around the underside — not across the back.
- ◆ You may prefer a two-handed technique for a large cat. Place one hand over the other interlocking the fingers. Then place the heel of the bottom hand directly over the heart and perform the compressions. They should be strong enough to compress the depth of the chest by 30 to 50 percent, being sure to allow the chest to completely recoil between compressions.
- ◆ Compress 30 times in 15 to 18 seconds and then breathe two short breaths into the cat's snout. Hold his mouth tightly closed and place your mouth over the nostrils, making a seal with the snout. Blow strong, quick breaths into the nostrils to achieve a normal chest rise. Then immediately resume compressions.
- ◆ Repeat this cycle of 30 compressions followed by two quick breaths until the cat is resuscitated or until you obtain veterinary assistance, or the effort is deemed unsuccessful.

The Coat Tells the Tale: Illness or Allergy

Hair loss or its failure to grow can be a sign of stress, parasites, endocrine disease or poor diet

All cats shed, but some cases become extreme to the point of baldness. If you've ever wondered if your cat needs a toupee, you're not alone. Hair loss, or alopecia, is common in cats. It is, however, a symptom of an underlying disorder, rather than a disorder itself, says dermatologist William H. Miller, VMD, Medical Director of the Cornell University Companion Animal Hospital. "In order to solve the alopecia, we need to determine the cause of the problem," Dr. Miller says.

Among the types of hair loss and their causes:

◆ **Failure to regrow.** "It's usually due to an underlying endocrine condition," Dr. Miller says. Causes can include diabetes mellitus, hyperthyroidism, which is an overproduction of thyroid hormone, and Cushing's syndrome (hyperadrenocorticism), an overproduction of cortisol by the adrenal gland.

◆ **Hair falling out.** "This is often due to stress — for example, the delivery of kittens or a serious illness," Dr. Miller says. Some cancers, such as those of the pancreas, have been linked to hair loss. The ringworm fungus and parasitic mites, which cause mange, can also be culprits, as can poor diet, sometimes from poorly formulated cat food with low nutritional value.

◆ **Hair being licked off or pulled out** when a cat engages in excessive grooming to dispel anxiety. Breeds most affected include the Siamese, Burmese, Himalayan and Abyssinian. Over-grooming can lead to small reddish bald spots that will spread and become irritated or infected as the cat continues to scratch or



An allergy caused licking and pulling of the haircoat and resulted in this traumatic hair loss.

chew at them. Veterinary behaviorists now recognize the behavior as obsessive-compulsive and sometimes prescribe anti-anxiety medications.

In almost all cases of traumatic hair loss, though, "The trigger event is underlying allergy, typically to a parasite or an environmental or food allergen," says Dr. Miller. Just as humans do, some cats can have allergic reactions to pollen, dust, mold, rubber, plastic, dyes or chemicals in carpets, bedding and cleaning products.

One particularly common allergen is flea saliva. In allergic cats, flea bites can cause intense itchiness, which may prompt them to repeatedly lick and chew at their haircoat. Cats may react similarly to certain topical medications or injections.

"While allergies can affect any breed of cat, some purebred lines have an increased frequency of allergy," Dr. Miller says. "The breeds affected can vary depending on the region of the country, but the Siamese and Persian breeds tend to be over represented."

For cats with an illness or allergy, the coat tells the tale. "Pay attention to your cat's coat and behavior," Dr. Miller says. "If the coat starts to get dull and dry, or develops hairless patches, take the cat to the veterinarian early on."

You may notice your cat licking excessively or chewing at his fur. Or you may find clumps of hair in his favorite resting spots. A sudden increase in hairballs and constipation often follow excessive grooming, so

be alert for these symptoms as well.

Diagnosing hair loss is easy, Dr. Miller says. "The coat is thinner than normal or may be totally gone. The tricky part is determining the cause. The history and location of the hair loss may help the veterinarian decide which diseases need to be considered."

Diagnostic Tests. Blood tests may uncover underlying diseases. X-rays may help detect adrenal gland abnormalities. If your cat's veterinarian suspects a dermatological problem, skin samples may be taken to check for mites or a fungal culture to check for ringworm.

Treatment depends on the cause of the hair loss, says Dr. Miller. "Parasitic diseases are treated with anti-parasitic agents. Endocrine hair loss needs to have the underlying endocrine disease treated." Flea preventives are available for flea allergies, and veterinarian-prescribed antihistamines or steroids can treat the inflammation.

A food allergy may require an overhaul of your cat's diet. His veterinarian may recommend a food elimination trial to determine the offending allergen.

It may not be easy to determine the reason your cat's hair is falling out, but once you do, proper treatment will allow the hair to regrow normally and your favorite feline will return to their full-coated glory. ♦

COLD LASER... *(continued from cover)*

bowel disease and feline eosinophilic granuloma, a complex skin condition that causes rashes, bumps, ulcers and swelling on the thighs, face, mouth and abdomen.

Low-level lasers represent a cutting-edge therapy that is turning many doubters into advocates. Among them is anesthesiologist Andrea Looney, DVM, Senior Lecturer in the Section of Pain Management at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. She emphasizes that cold lasers are not the same as surgical lasers. "Cold lasers don't coagulate or cut tissue, but they are able to positively affect all kinds of healing processes," she says. "Any tissue with pain or inflammation can be affected."

Non-invasive Treatment. In her work, Dr. Looney encountered cats who wouldn't accept acupuncture needles for post-surgery therapy and decided to try cold lasers. Because cats can move fast and often feel stressed at clinics, some of them don't easily tolerate acupuncture, she says, adding that a noninvasive treatment like lasers seems to have a soothing effect on them.

"I started using cold laser therapy for these cats and the results were pretty miraculous," says Dr. Looney. "We saw improvement in their mobility, even in senior-aged cats."

Cold lasers use short wavelength light to generate energies within the cells, much as photosynthesis works in plants. In a typical treatment session, a cat is made comfortable on a towel in a quiet exam room. A veterinarian or technician wearing protective goggles applies the laser wand to a specific area of the cat to relieve pain. The frequency of treatment and its length are determined on a case-by-case basis.

Dr. Looney cites these advantages of using low-level lasers in managing pain in cats:

- ◆ Their pain is considerably reduced. A cat will feel warmth but isn't at



A cat will feel warmth from a low-level laser but isn't at risk of burns and cuts as may occur with surgical lasers.

risk of burns or cuts as may occur with the use of surgical lasers. Veterinarians liken the heat generated by low-level lasers to the warmth from heat lamps.

- ◆ The lasers don't require pets to be sedated or the affected areas to be shaved.
- ◆ They safely complement other pain-fighting treatments, such as medications, acupuncture and physical rehabilitation. "It's sad to say that the average antibiotic or pain medication may not completely relieve the pain or aid in the healing," says Dr. Looney. "Even though an animal may be on a non-steroidal medication, the surgical site may still hurt, a sore may not readily heal and hair may not grow back."
- ◆ Therapy laser treatments are affordable. Sessions generally cost \$20 to \$50 per session and may total \$200 to \$400 for a package of treatments over six weeks. For pets with chronic conditions, such as osteoarthritis, Dr. Looney says after completing a full session, the pets usually need only shorter, follow-up sessions monthly to every other month.

- ◆ The sessions are short, lasting between three and 30 minutes, depending on the pet's condition and size.

One caveat, however: Low-level laser therapy is not recommended for cats or dogs with cancerous masses. The laser beam could increase blood flow to cancer cells.

Otherwise, there is no evidence that this form of laser therapy has produced harmful side effects, Dr. Looney says. In fact, as more owners hear about the therapy, they request it for their pets, prompting more training sessions at veterinary conferences. "It takes, on average, about a month or two for a veterinarian to feel comfortable using this form of laser therapy," she says. "There is a learning curve involved, but the more we use it, the more we learn about it."

Dr. Looney expects peer-reviewed studies to emerge as more veterinarians use the therapy. "I wish I could say what the next step will be," she says, "but I do urge interested pet owners to speak to their veterinarians about this new option in managing pain and chronic inflammation." ♦

SCRATCHING ...

(continued from cover)

The research, published in the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery*, also found that scratching behavior varied with the cats' gender and neutering status. For example, intact male cats scratched surfaces other than scratching posts, but neutered males and females and intact females rarely chose furniture to scratch.

Not all cats scratch with the same frequency, and there is no breed predisposition. It can be difficult to determine scratching's importance to an individual cat, but frequency is a tell-tale factor, Dr. Houpt says, explaining that the more a cat scratches, the more important it is to him.

"Scratching is an evolutionary remnant of marking behavior," says Bruce G. Kornreich, DVM, Ph.D., Associate Director for Education and Outreach at the Feline Health Center at Cornell. "It allows deposition of scents from the glands in paws and also helps cats groom their nails. It removes the nail sheath so that the new nail can grow."



Some cats prefer material with loops they can dig their claws into — bliss!

Neutering's Effect. Declawed cats continue to scratch, which suggests that they're not merely sharpening their

claws. Neutering decreases scratching in males, but it is not known if the same is true for spayed female cats.

Whatever the status of your cat, it's easier on you — and him — if you don't have to change this innate behavior. Trimming the nails regularly, every one or two weeks, makes a significant difference. A cat's nail is shaped as a hook, and when you trim it, you cut off the hook, which can prevent household damage. Plastic nail sheaths can prevent the nails from doing damage, but nails grow out quickly.

While owners sometimes believe that cats scratch expensive objects, such as the brand new sofa, Dr. Houpt says location and substrate are more important to them. So is the ability to mark their territory. "Let's say you bring a box in. He will scratch it to show the other cat or people that this is his territory," she says. "Many times when you come home, a cat runs to the furniture and starts scratching. That could be marking behavior. The cat appears to be

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'WE CONSIDER DECLAWING AS A LAST-DITCH EFFORT'

Declawing is a controversial surgical procedure that removes a cat's claws and the last joint of his toes. It's frequently performed when a cat is neutered; however, both the American Veterinary Medical Association and American Animal Hospital Association oppose the practice, saying that it is not medically necessary in most cases.

The surgery should be considered only after attempts have been made to prevent the cat from using claws destructively or when clawing presents serious health risks to geriatric, diabetic or immunocompromised owners, the AVMA says.

Cats use scratching to mark their territory both visually and with scent, to stretch themselves and to condition their claws, the AVMA says, adding that the surgery, called an onychectomy, has risks, including anesthetic complications, hemorrhage, infection and pain.

"I am against routine declawing that happens when a cat gets altered," says animal behaviorist Katherine H. Houpt, VMD, Ph.D., at Cornell. "More people declaw cats because they are getting scratched, not the fur-

niture. That's play aggression. You can teach them to play with appropriate things or blow whistles when the cat is stalking you, so you don't have to amputate his toes. However, by the time one member of a couple gets to 'He goes or I go,' in that case I would put the cat through declawing rather than have the cat surrendered to a shelter and euthanized. Declawing is a whole lot better than death."

Bruce G. Kornreich, DVM, Ph.D., Associate Director for Education and Outreach at the Feline Health Center at Cornell, concurs. "Declawing is a pretty dramatic measure. We like to consider the concept of declawing as a last-ditch effort. It can be associated with discomfort and surgical risks. If you've tried all of the non-surgical alternatives without success, and scratching will force you to give up your cat to a shelter, it's better to have him declawed."

If the surgery must be done, it's important that the veterinarian use good analgesia, Dr. Houpt says, adding that declawing with a laser is generally less painful than using a scalpel because it causes less tissue damage.

saying, "You may be in this room, but it is my room."

Watch Him in Action. The best way to determine the kind of post your cat likes is to simply watch him. If he doesn't like one post, try another. Some scratching posts have indoor/outdoor carpeting that doesn't appeal to cats. They might prefer wood covered with fabric or sisal. Material with loops they can get their claws into is a special favorite.

Some posts can be hung from door knobs or lie horizontally. Some cats prefer a horizontal surface such as the rug, and for them Dr. Houpt recommends catnip-impregnated corrugated cardboard.

Whichever type of post or tree your cat likes, place it where he likes to scratch, probably in the room where you and the cat spend time. Putting it next to the couch is good because it's a prominent place. The minimum number of scratching posts for multiple cats: the number that prevents inappropriate scratching, Dr. Kornreich says. He suggests working your way up from the lowest to highest number.

You can train your cat to use a post in steps. With kittens and young adults, the best way is to encourage them to use scratching devices. These are objects designed to attract a cat's scratching attention, including flat objects such as pads for horizontal scratchers and toys usually covered with sisal rope, fabric or cardboard.

Catnip Helps. Take your cat to a device and put toys on top of it. Or try rubbing catnip on it or placing treats on it and giving positive reinforcement when the cat uses it. Dr. Houpt says there's a lack of good research on the

use of pheromones — chemical substances produced by an animal that usually serve as a stimulus for behavioral responses — but she has heard anecdotally that they can help.

One problem she sees in her practice is when a couple marries and one of them likes the new furniture better than the scratching cat. "Once a cat has learned it's OK to scratch the furniture, it's going to be hard for him to discriminate between the old couch on the porch vs. the new one in the living room. Try to teach him to use only his own scratching post or areas."

Punishment doesn't work because cats don't respond to yelling by not scratching. It's like yelling at a cat for doing something as natural as grooming, Dr. Kornreich says.

A variety of possible deterrents are available:

- ◆ **Furniture repellent sprays.** They discourage some cats, but often scents last for only 10 minutes before the odor dissipates.
- ◆ **Sticky double-sided tape.** Place it on furniture, as long as it doesn't damage it.
- ◆ **Smooth shields.** They may deter scratching on furniture because the cat loses interest when he can't get a good pull.
- ◆ **Safe booby traps.** A tower of plastic cups works harmlessly.
- ◆ **A compressed air can designed for cats.** Dr. Houpt is a fan of Ssscat Automated



Plastic nail sheaths, or caps, can prevent scratches on furniture, but nails grow out quickly.

Cat Deterrent. When a cat approaches a restricted area, a motion detector releases a spray of non-toxic gas in a hiss to shoo him away. She puts it on her kitchen counter and at doorways to keep her cat indoors. "It's like being hissed at by a lion," Dr. Houpt says.

It's not reasonable to assume that discouraging your cat from scratching one piece of furniture will stop the behavior altogether. He may simply pick another object, and more than one deterrent may be necessary. Often the more effective course is the positive one, Dr. Houpt says. "Give him something more appealing to scratch." ♦

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please look up Destructive Behavior in Health Topics on the Cornell Feline Health Center's website, www.vet.cornell.edu/FHC.

FIRST AID

CPR... (continued from page 3)

"Being prepared for a pet emergency and knowing what to do when one occurs may make a difference in the outcome for your pet," says Dr. Schoeffler. She recommends that

owners enroll in pet CPR or first-aid classes taught by qualified instructors. Check with your cat's veterinarian for a recommendation.

"In our ER, we see an awful lot of trauma-related injuries, such as cats

having been hit by a car or involved in a fight," says Dr. Schoeffler. Certainly, you face limitations when your cat has been injured, but if you know first aid and apply it correctly, it could be life saving. ♦



Elizabeth

Elizabeth is thankful for the assistance of **Bruce G. Kornreich, DVM, Ph.D., DACVIM**, Associate Director of the Cornell Feline Health Center, in providing the answer on this page.

PLEASE SHARE YOUR QUESTIONS

We welcome questions on health, medicine and behavior, but regret that we cannot comment on prior diagnoses and specific products. Please write CatWatch Editor, 800 Connecticut Ave., Norwalk, CT, 06854 or email catwatcheditor@cornell.edu.

COMING UP ...

- ❖ HOW CATS SEE
- ❖ CHANGES IN COAT COLOR
- ❖ COMMUNICABLE DISEASES
- ❖ REVERSE SNEEZING
- ❖

When a Health Scare Hits Home, the Tests Begin

Dear Friends,

Nothing brings home the seriousness of a medical condition like the frightening prospect of having the condition yourself, and I'd like to tell you about a recent scare that I had. We usually take questions from readers for this column, but please allow me to tell you about an important feline health issue.

It all started when my mom was petting me. She was stroking my belly and suddenly felt a small lump in my mammary region. She immediately became concerned and took me to the veterinarian.

After a complete physical examination (that tickled!), my veterinarian agreed that the lump was of concern. He explained that mammary cancers are among the most common cancers in cats, with a type called adenocarcinoma being the most common. Although benign tumors occur, they are relatively rare. He also explained that the majority of mammary adenocarcinomas are diagnosed in female cats between 10 and 12 years old (I'm slightly older) and that affected cats are most commonly intact (I was spayed years ago).

I had a series of tests, including chest X-rays to make sure that a cancer hadn't spread (metastasized) to my lungs (thankfully, not) and blood work to make sure my organs were doing well (they were). The veterinarian then said, given the potential for adenocarcinoma, which is very aggressive, surgery would be the best course and that in the majority of cases, a radical mastectomy (removal of all the mammary glands on the affected side) is the treatment/diagnostic of choice because of mammary cancer's high risk of recurrence. In some cases, a complete mastectomy, in which all the mammary glands are removed, is elected, depending upon the masses' distribution and other issues like lymph node involvement.

In many cases, he said surgery is used with chemotherapy. A very important consideration and a factor in determining prognosis is the mass' size. This was the scary part. Cats with tumors larger than

3 cm in diameter — slightly more than an inch — survive an average of four to six months. Tumors between 2 and 3 centimeters usually result in survival of about two years, and with tumors less than 2 cm in diameter, more than three years.

I felt my life pass before my eyes until the veterinarian said that my mass was about — drumroll here — one-half to three-fourths of a cm in diameter and that he did not feel any lymph node enlargement.

After a long discussion with my parents, during which they expressed concern for the discomfort that may result from a radical mastectomy and the likelihood that a tumor of this size would significantly shorten my life, they decided I would have a lumpectomy, with removal just the mass itself, along with wide margins around it. The veterinarian said that this was not the standard recommendation and that a radical mastectomy would be ideal, but he also said that he understood my parents' position.

Surgery went surprisingly well, and everyone who took care of me was so wonderful. Recovery was relatively quick, and I got a lot of sympathy from many visitors (boy, did they spoil me!). We anxiously awaited the opinion of the pathologist, who would do a microscopic evaluation of the mass. When the results came back as benign hyperplasia of the mammary gland (a non-cancerous condition characterized by a mild overgrowth of mammary gland tissue), I let out a huge meow of relief, as did my parents. We all felt so lucky.

So, my feline friends, the take-home message is to have your owners examine you regularly and focus on the mammary region, as early diagnosis and treatment are the key to favorable outcomes with this disease.

I hope this letter finds you well and that you will go over to your parents, roll over on your back, and let them feel your belly. The worst that will happen is that you may get a jump on any problems in your mammary glands. The best is that you will get a belly rub. Sounds like a win-win to me!

—Best regards, Elizabeth ❖

CORRESPONDENCE

The Editor
CatWatch
800 Connecticut Ave.
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