



CatWatch

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



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IN THE NEWS ...

A Step Toward Uncovering Their Sixth-Sense Behavior?

The list of animals with ultraviolet vision — the ability to see high-frequency rays of light invisible to humans — extends from bees, bats, birds, fish and mice to reptiles. Until now, few mammals were believed to have this capability. The lenses of human eyes, for example, block ultraviolet light.

Now a study at City University London suggests that cats, dogs and certain other small mammals like ferrets can also see UV light. The researchers measured UV light entering the lens of animals' eyes and found that it penetrated to the retina and was converted to visual nerve signals entering the brain.

They haven't determined the basis of this ability but say it serves several purposes, such as skill as nighttime predators and survivors. For example, reindeers use UV light to help distinguish polar bears in white snow. They do say knowing many animals have ultraviolet vision could provide greater understanding of their behavior. Perhaps their sixth sense? They see things we don't. ♦

Facing a Hard Fact: Our Cats Are Fat

More than 50 percent are overweight or obese, which can stress arthritic joints and lead to serious disease

Veterinarians classify 54 percent of cats in the U.S. as overweight or obese, according to a study by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention. That's about one in two cats or about 47 million. The association calls the situation — without irony — an “expanding epidemic.”

But it's no laughing matter. Excess weight diminishes a cat's quality of life. It's hard on arthritic joints and can lead to



Therapeutic foods can aid weight loss.

liver problems, diabetes and cancer, says Joseph Wakshlag, DVM, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Nutrition at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.

Q How do you define overweight or obese, Dr. Wakshlag?

A Cats should remain in the four-to-five range on the Purina Body Condition System (on Page 7). As they age, a score of five is better, and five-and-a-half isn't so bad, but you don't want to get above that. Obese is eight

(continued on page 6)

Why Young Kittens Fail to Thrive

Genetics, environment and infectious diseases can be to blame, but quick intervention can sometimes save them

Millions of kittens are born each spring — the majority to stray or feral mothers. The lucky ones end up in the care of kindhearted humans. But many of these new owners and foster parents face heartbreak when their tiny charges succumb to fading kitten syndrome — a disturbingly common occurrence. Even under the best of circumstances, an estimated 15 to 27 percent of all kittens die before they're 9 weeks old.

“There are a variety of reasons for the death of very young kittens,” says veterinary cardiologist Bruce Kornreich, DVM, Ph.D., Associate Director of the Cornell

Feline Health Center, which supports vital research investigating several causes of fading kitten syndrome. These include calicivirus, a common respiratory infection, and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP), a routinely fatal viral infection.

Future Hope. Ongoing studies supported by the Center hold the promise of clarifying the mechanism of these important feline diseases and improving our ability to prevent, diagnose and treat cats afflicted by them.

“The causes of fading kitten syndrome can be roughly divided into genetic, environmental

(continued on page 5)

CatWatch

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SHORT TAKES

When They Went to the ER for Cat Bites

A three-year retrospective study of people who went to the Mayo Clinic Hospital in Rochester, Minn., with cat bites to their hands found that 30 percent of them required hospitalization. While dog bites can seem dramatic, with torn skin, broken bones and considerable bleeding, their open wounds can often be easier to clean — and heal.

Cat bites, however, can pose serious problems. Their deep puncture wounds make victims vulnerable to bacterial infections. Of the 193 Mayo Clinic patients whose cases were reported in the *Journal of Hand Surgery*:

- ◆ 36 were immediately admitted to the hospital, where they stayed an average of three days.
- ◆ 154 were treated with oral antibiotics as outpatients, but 21 of them later had to be hospitalized.

Complications involved nerve problems, abscesses and loss of joint mobility. The aggressive bacteria *Pasteurella multocida* in the mouths of many animals and up to 90 percent of healthy cats was the most common cause of infection, the researchers say.

"Redness, swelling, increasing pain, difficulty in moving the hand and drainage from the wound are all signs that there may be an infection and that treatment should be sought," says the study's senior author, Brian T. Carlsen, MD, a hand surgeon at the Mayo Clinic. "The tendon sheaths and joints are superficial in the hand, and cat bites penetrate easily, seeding those spaces with the germ. Once it's in there, it can grow quite rapidly in fluid-filled

spaces that don't have blood circulation, and surgery is often required."

His message: "Don't ignore a cat bite." In fact, as the CatWatch October 2013 article "How to Avoid Those Sharp Feline Bites" advises, older or immuno-compromised individuals should immediately see a doctor if they have been bitten because of the risk of bacterial infection.

Allergy-free Breeds?

No cats have been proven to be hypoallergenic, but an air purifier manufacturer and environmental consulting firm have included two feline breeds on a list of 10 allergen-friendly pets.

One is the Javanese, whose name, like some other Oriental breeds, derives from Southeast Asian countries and islands rather than their origin. The Javanese was developed in North America. The breed, recognized as a show cat, has an elegant body and no undercoat and, as a result, even though he's a longhair, has less fur to shed.

Allergens in cat saliva, especially the protein Fel d 1, can trigger allergic reactions in humans. Cats spread the protein, found in dander in their fur and skin, when they groom themselves.

The second cat on the list is the Devon Rex, a shorthaired cat with a slender body and large ears. The intensely loyal breed is celebrated for a fun-loving nature that the Cat Fanciers Association says some describe as a cross between a cat, dog, monkey and Dennis the Menace.

The allergen-friendly list was sponsored by Kaz Inc. of Southborough, Mass., with participation from Ted Myatt, senior scientist at Environmental Health and Engineering in Needham, Mass. ♦

No cat is hypoallergenic,
but the shorthaired Devon
Rex made the cut for allergy-
friendly breeds.



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Anatomy's Impact on the Eyelids

They can fold inward in short-nosed breeds, causing blinking, inflammation and considerable discomfort

If you notice your cat squinting or his eyes watering, he may be suffering from entropion, a condition that causes part of the eyelids to fold inward and eyelashes to rub on the eyes' surface. It usually affects the lower eyelids but can also impact the upper lids, in either case causing considerable discomfort.

Telltale signs may also include:

- ◆ Red and swollen eyelids
- ◆ Excessive blinking
- ◆ Inflammation of the eye membranes (conjunctivitis)
- ◆ Sagging skin around the eye socket
- ◆ Mucus or other discharge from the eyes
- ◆ Rubbing or pawing the eyes

"Entropion is most commonly a genetic condition with brachycephalic breeds, such as Persians and Himalayans, at higher risk because of their skull conformations," says J. Seth Eaton, VMD, ACVO, a veterinary ophthalmology consultant and former staff ophthalmologist at Cornell University Veterinary Specialties in Stamford, Conn.

The anatomy of short-nosed breeds puts more strain on the ligaments of the eyelids than it does in other types of cats, particularly adjacent to the nose. As a result, veterinarians may detect entropion within the first year of a kitten's life during a routine physical examination.

However, entropion can occur in any cat at any age due to chronic disease or injury to the eyes. While the abnormality is more common in dogs, owners should be alert to its signs in their cat. The often-painful disorder can cause scar-tissue buildup, painful corneal ulceration and even blindness. (The condition is not to be confused with ectropion, in which the eyelids droop and roll outward.)

"Although inherited predisposition is the most common cause," Dr. Eaton says, "entropion can also develop as a result of eyelid trauma that heals improperly, as a secondary condition to a chronic herpes infection that scars the lining inside the eyelid, or even secondary to advanced age."

When an eyelash or hair folds into the lower eyelid, it can press against the eye's surface and cause scratches and irritation. Eventually, the trapped hair can lead to the development of a painful corneal ulcer. The cornea is the clear "window" on the surface of the eyeball.

During a physical exam, it's common for a veterinarian to inspect each eye under normal light and then in dim light. A fluorescein dye is usually applied to stain the eye to detect possible ulcers in the cornea or other damage to the eye.

Although veterinarians may initially prescribe topical ointments and artificial tears to lubricate the affected eyes in early stages of this condition, medication is considered only a short-term solution.

Best Treatment. "Surgery to correct this condition is the most secure and best way to treat it," says Dr. Eaton. "We've tried different non-surgical options, including collagen injections into the eyelids, but they are not yet proven to be as successful as surgery."

While your cat is under general anesthesia, an elliptical piece of tissue directly under the eye is removed and the two sides are sutured together, pulling the affected eyelid downward. The procedure usually takes 30 minutes to an hour.

"There is a little bit of art to performing the entropion surgery," says Dr. Eaton. "We try to determine how much tissue to take out to correct the



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Short-nosed breeds such as Persians are at higher risk for entropion because of their skull conformations.

problem, yet not remove an excessive amount of tissues, as overcorrection of entropion can also cause problems."

On the Mend. To prevent your cat from pawing at his eyes and sutures when he returns home, he'll be fitted with a rigid Elizabethan collar rather than a lightweight or inflatable type. "I recommend fitting your cat with a clear plastic version of the Elizabethan collar — not an opaque or colored one," Dr. Eaton says. "This way, your cat can see his surroundings while wearing this medical recovery collar."

After surgery, the veterinarian will prescribe lubricating eye drops and antibiotics to reduce the risk of infection. Prognosis for a full recovery is favorable for most cats, with a 90-plus percent success rate. Post-surgical complications are rare, but sometimes a second surgery may be necessary to permanently correct the eyelids' folding inward.

"The most common complication we see in entropion surgery is that the condition returns, and a second procedure is necessary," Dr. Eaton says.

Postoperatively, stitches will be in place on the external surface of the eyelid skin and removed 10 to 14 days afterward. "While there may be some inflammation and swelling of the membranes lining the eyelids immediately after correction," Dr. Seaton says, "most cats regain a normal appearance within one to two weeks after surgery." ♦

When Normal Yeast Goes Wild

An overabundance results in scratching and produces substances that irritate the skin, acting as an allergen

You won't sniff out this culprit, but you'll see its work, the strong-scented fungal infection that causes a cat to scratch-scratch-scratch his ears or chew his paws to rawness. The tiny perpetrator: an overabundance of microscopic yeast.

More than 1,500 species of yeast exist, each playing specific roles in life, such as raising bread and brewing beer. One type, *Malassezia*, lives on your cat's skin and your skin, too. You'll never notice it until something causes the balance to tip, and the usually good *Malassezia* go wild, leading to itchiness of a magnitude requiring a visit to the veterinarian.

Fighting Fungi. "Yeasts are a part of the normal flora of the body," says dermatologist William H. Miller, VMD, Medical Director of the Cornell University Hospital for Animals at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "They help prevent, or slow down, the colonization of the skin by pathogenic fungi or bacteria."

"*Malassezia* is a normal inhabitant of the skin and ear canal. If something changes in the ecology of the skin/ear surface, the yeasts can start to multiply," he says. "As they grow, they produce various substances which can irritate the skin and act as an allergen."

Unlike the dog, yeast infections in cats are uncommon. The most common site for a yeast infection in the cat is in the ear canal, and it usually follows some medical or other topical ear treatment. Cats do get yeast infections of their skin, and this often signals some significant underlying skin condition.

Skin lesions are very variable and can range from a dandruff condition to an itchy dermatitis; chin acne; or bald, shiny skin. A cat with a fungal infection in his ears may show behavioral changes such as shaking or tilting the



Yeast infection of a cat's skin often signals a significant underlying condition.

head, walking in circles and scooting an itchy rear across the carpet.

A veterinarian can uncover the reason for the symptoms and whether yeast is the culprit. Among possible causes:

- ◆ Steroid medication given to cats with allergies.
- ◆ Antibiotics that are used to treat skin infections caused by allergies. They kill good bacteria along with the bad.
- ◆ Topical ear medications that either irritate the ear canal or change the microflora of the ear.
- ◆ An object trapped in the ear.
- ◆ Water trapped in the ear canal.
- ◆ A growth in the ear canal.

Diagnosis and treatment of the infection are uncomplicated. First,

the veterinarian will look into your cat's ears with an otoscope, much as a doctor examines human ears. "Usually a smear is made and the yeast are looked for under a microscope," Dr. Miller says. "If they are seen, a topical product may be all that is needed. In chronic cases, especially those involving the skin, an anti-yeast medication — topical or pill — is added to the topical agent."

The anti-yeast medication may be an ointment or cream containing miconazole or ketoconazole. Treatment can take a while. "Most significant infections take 30 days or so of treatment," Dr. Miller says. "Chronic cases can take months." Because *Malassezia* are found on healthy pets, the idea behind treatment is not to wipe it out but to arrest its growth and reduce its numbers.

Iffy Home Treatments.

Home remedies for skin and ear infections in pets also exist. In most cases, Dr. Miller says, "They are OK as long as they aren't too crazy." Cats have more sensi-

tive ear canals than dogs, and it's easy to irritate the cat's ear with a product that works well in your dog. It's best to avoid home remedies and go to your veterinarian to get the best medicine for your cat.

Cats with food allergies may require special attention. Despite the growth in anti-allergy pet foods on the market today, "I doubt that allergies are more common," Dr. Miller says. "I believe it's just diagnosed more often now."

If your cat has allergies, the diet-yeast link is all a matter of balance, Dr. Miller says. If the cat is allergic to a food ingredient, the goal is to feed him a good diet that nourishes him yet supports his immune system without causing yeast to bloom. A veterinary nutritionist can help. ♦

KITTENS... *(continued from cover)*

and infectious causes — and a kitten might be impacted by several of these simultaneously,” Dr. Kornreich says. Genetic conditions include congenital birth defects, such as an abnormal development of the gastrointestinal tract, which can affect a kitten’s ability to digest food or eliminate waste products, heart defects, and skull or mouth defects, which can render a kitten unable to nurse.

Environmental factors include toxins in the environment and ambient temperatures that are either too hot or too cold. The hyper- and hypothermia that may result from these conditions can be life-threatening, especially for very young kittens who are unable to regulate their body temperatures.

“Failure to thrive can also result from an inexperienced mother cat who doesn’t lie down with the kittens often enough or long enough to keep them warm,” Dr. Kornreich says. “Other mother cats may not produce sufficient milk. The average kitten needs to gain between 7 to 10 grams [about one-fourth to one-third of an ounce] per day to be healthy.”

Another condition known as neonatal isoerythrolysis, in which the mother develops antibodies to the red blood cells of her kitten, can result in red blood cell destruction and anemia when the kitten ingests the mother’s antibodies in her milk. These blood type mismatches, which may occur more frequently in purebred cats, are often fatal.

Immunity From Mom. In addition to FIP, infectious diseases such as panleukopenia and herpesvirus can be fatal to kittens. They are also prone to bacterial infections, especially if they don’t receive colostrum, a component of their mother’s milk containing vital protective antibodies that is produced in the very early lactation period, within their first days of life.

Intestinal parasites such as roundworms can be transmitted via the placenta and mammary glands, so if the mother cat is infected, the kittens

are at risk. Hookworms, another intestinal parasite, may also be transmitted via a mother cat’s milk.

The offspring of stray and feral cats are particularly prone to fading kitten syndrome. “Stray kittens are more likely to be exposed to extreme temperatures, diseases, parasites and unsanitary conditions — and orphaned kittens may miss out on their mother’s colostrum,” Dr. Kornreich says.

Problems with newborns are often difficult to detect until a crisis develops. One can be the mother cat’s failing to care properly for the kittens. Caretakers should also watch for these critical signs:

- ◆ Underweight kittens who don’t nurse or gain weight. “If a kitten is not nursing, or if you notice milk coming from a kitten’s nose after nursing, gently open the mouth to check for a cleft palate, which can make him unable to nurse,” Dr. Kornreich says.
- ◆ Decreased activity and isolation from littermates.
- ◆ Less vocalization, low heart rates and body temperatures.
- ◆ Blue-ish gums, an indication of cyanosis due to low oxygenation of tissues secondary to heart problems.
- ◆ Pale gums, which suggest low red blood cell levels.

Any of these signs warrants an immediate trip to the veterinarian, who will perform a physical examination and obtain a medical history. Questions may concern maternal nutrition, the delivery, mothering behavior and possible exposures to chemicals, toxins and infections.

“The word ‘syndrome’ refers to a condition that may be incompletely understood and/or has multiple causes or symptoms associated with it,” Dr. Kornreich says. “Treatment depends



Underweight kittens often do well once bottle-feeding begins.

upon which of these causes is involved. Insufficient weight gain can be remedied by supplementing the kitten’s diet with milk replacer. Bacterial infections may require antibiotics. Low blood sugar levels may warrant glucose. Kittens with low red blood cell counts may need oxygen and/or nutritional supplementation. And kittens with isoerythrolysis may require a blood transfusion.”

The prognosis depends largely upon the cause of the kitten’s decline and how quickly intervention takes place, says Dr. Kornreich. “Sadly, kittens with FIP rarely survive. However, low-weight kittens often do better once bottle-feeding begins.”

To prevent fading kitten syndrome, keep strong fumes, such as harsh cleaning products, away from kittens to reduce environmental risk, Dr. Kornreich says. “Make sure the mother cat is vaccinated, free of parasites and eating a high-quality diet. Keep the temperature comfortable and the kitten area clean.” Careful monitoring of kittens’ activity levels and body weight may also provide early clues that something is amiss.

“In a nutshell, my advice is to keep the mother cat and the environment healthy, monitor the kittens closely, and intervene quickly at the first sign of trouble,” Dr. Kornreich says. “The kittens’ lives may literally depend on it.” ♦

WEIGHT...(continued from cover)

or nine. Cats tend to gain weight and maintain that overweight or obese status since fat tissue is not very metabolically active. Cats tend to not be as active when obese, so you really need to cut calories to get weight loss.

Q What is the best way to keep pounds off?

A Understand the body condition scoring system. Don't feed according to what the food bag says. Typically, what a kitten is eating at around 4 months of age is about the amount that the cat will need as an adult.

Q Are therapeutic weight-loss diets — the kind you buy at the veterinary clinic — healthy?

A All the therapeutic foods designed for weight loss are healthy and cats can stay on them for years if needed.

Q What's the best way for cats to lose weight?

A We can do aggressive weight loss with therapeutic foods formulated to have extra vitamins and minerals so they are getting what they need. When I go to the supermarket and get a "light" formula

and give only 60 percent of what it says to give, I can potentially shortchange that cat on vitamins and minerals. That's why we recommend therapeutic diets. They help with satiety and have a higher protein-to-calorie ratio as well as carnitine (a substance that helps the body turn fat into energy) that may help maintain muscle mass during weight loss. They can optimize weight loss, and that's why they are more expensive. You can get a high-protein low-calorie food from the grocery store but you risk shortchanging vitamins and minerals.

Many people make a mistake by switching brands. Let's say they give a high-end weight-loss food although they don't know how many calories it has. Then they switch to weight management in another brand and cut back, so the cat gets less food than before. But foods from different manufacturers have different calorie levels — there is a huge range — so unless you know the number of calories in each one, you could feed less but still give more calories. You may not be doing your cat justice.

Stay with the same brand or same family of products, as their weight management or "light formula" will definitely have fewer calories than the

product from the same brand for adult maintenance. Most of the manufacturers list calorie counts on their website — not the bag — or you have to phone them.

Q How do you figure out how many calories per pound to give to achieve weight loss?

A Have your vet help with the calculation, and use the ideal body weight as a guide. Typically, you need around 20 calories per pound of body weight to maintain a cat or get slow weight loss, although that's at rest. Let's say my cat is 13 pounds but he should be 9. I multiply 9 by 20 calories to get the resting weight requirement, but you usually have to go lower than that to get good weight loss. This 13-pound cat needs 180 calories at a resting rate. This plan might work for a high-activity cat to lose weight, but most people have to drop it back even more.

Q What treats are appropriate for an overweight cat?

A Unfortunately, treats during a weight-loss plan are hard to recommend. Often we tell owners to use the kibble they are feeding as a treat. Five extra kibble are usually not a problem and can be taken from the main meal.

Q Any parting advice?

A From a veterinary perspective, weight gain in cats is due to the inactive and over-consumptive lifestyle of most indoor cats. Doing things to get your cat more active and making sure to feed appropriately will help with future problems. Cats who cannot groom themselves because they are too heavy can have skin issues that can become life threatening, and the risk of developing diabetes is very real in overweight cats.

Being diligent and weighing out the right amount of food every day is critical to a successful weight-loss program. Ideal weight loss is between one to two percent per week, and your veterinarian can help you track this since all therapeutic diets are not created equally. Some are high in fiber for satiety and others are not. ❖

FOR THOSE WHO NEED TO GAIN WEIGHT

Shelter workers and those who foster underweight cats often face challenges in encouraging them to eat. "The GI tract and its absorptive surfaces are atrophied in cases of malnutrition," says nutritionist Joseph Wakshlag, DVM, Ph.D., at Cornell. "It's a plastic organ in the way it adapts to too much or too little food. Feeding a cat a lot immediately is not ideal. Feed these cats based on the same calculation as we did for the heavy cat for the resting energy requirement (on this page) and work your way up for two or three days.

"If there is no diarrhea, then move up 20 percent, then another 20 percent after another few days, and he should start to gain weight by the end of that week. Feed him around 30 calories per pound to gain weight, based on what the cat's ideal body weight should be. Some cats adapt quickly, but some get diarrhea no matter what — and need to be handled with more incremental increases, but most do very well once fed properly."

To keep weight on a finicky eater, Dr. Wakshlag recommends switching the cat to a food with more palatability, which has higher levels of fat, added protein and added calories.



Nestlé PURINA

BODY CONDITION SYSTEM

TOO THIN

1

Ribs visible on shorthaired cats; no palpable fat; severe abdominal tuck; lumbar vertebrae and wings of ilia easily palpated.

2

Ribs easily visible on shorthaired cats; lumbar vertebrae obvious with minimal muscle mass; pronounced abdominal tuck; no palpable fat.

3

Ribs easily palpable with minimal fat covering; lumbar vertebrae obvious; obvious waist behind ribs; minimal abdominal fat.

4

Ribs palpable with minimal fat covering; noticeable waist behind ribs; slight abdominal tuck; abdominal fat pad absent.

IDEAL

5

Well-proportioned; observe waist behind ribs; ribs palpable with slight fat covering; abdominal fat pad minimal.

6

Ribs palpable with slight excess fat covering; waist and abdominal fat pad distinguishable but not obvious; abdominal tuck absent.

7

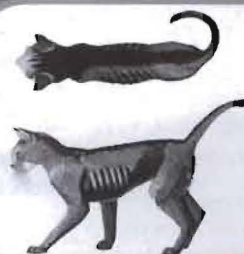
Ribs not easily palpated with moderate fat covering; waist poorly discernible; obvious rounding of abdomen; moderate abdominal fat pad.

8

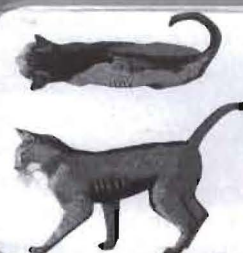
Ribs not palpable with excess fat covering; waist absent; obvious rounding of abdomen with prominent abdominal fat pad; fat deposits present over lumbar area.

9

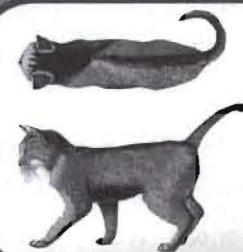
Ribs not palpable under heavy fat cover; heavy fat deposits over lumbar area, face and limbs; distention of abdomen with no waist; extensive abdominal fat deposits.



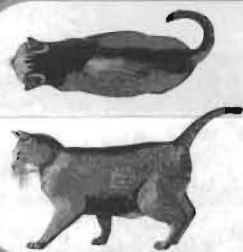
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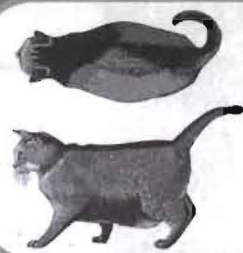
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5



7



9

Call 1-800-222-VETS (8387), weekdays, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. CT



Nestlé PURINA



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 ...

- ❖
- FEAR
AGGRESSION**
- ❖
- LIVING WITH
DIABETES**
- ❖
- WHAT TO
EXPECT AT
ANNUAL EXAMS**
- ❖
- FIRST AID
FOR BURNS**
- ❖

Lack of Rigorous Testing Hinders Alternative Medicine

Q I have a 3-year-old male domestic short-haired cat who has been diagnosed with Feline Hyperesthesia Syndrome [believed to be an obsessive condition or seizure, involving excessive scratching, vocalization, grooming, running about and skin rippling on the back], and I have been giving him holistic remedies to treat him. I am dismayed by the relative lack of acceptance of alternative medicine by the veterinary medical profession. What are your thoughts on this issue?

A I understand your feelings about this, and you are not alone in believing that alternative medical practices have received less than blanket acceptance by the veterinary medical (or human medical, for that matter) profession. This is likely due to a number of factors, including historical educational tendencies, unfamiliarity and, in many cases, a lack of rigorous scientific demonstration of benefit of alternative medical therapies. I can give you my thoughts on the matter, for whatever they are worth!

Alternative medicine may be defined as a group of healing therapies that fall outside "conventional" medical practices. This definition is a loose one, as what is accepted as "conventional" may vary from place to place. The ambiguity of this definition is complicated by the fact that the origin of many of these practices is often antique and exotic. I think that part of the problem with acceptance of some of these practices is a lack of familiarity, which naturally causes people to feel uncomfortable.

One point about alternative medicine that understandably makes some people uncomfortable is that in many, if not most, cases, there is a relative lack of scientific proof that these therapies work. This does not necessarily mean that they do not provide a benefit to patients, but rather that a benefit has not been definitively demonstrated.

Demonstration of a therapy's benefit requires rigorous testing using the scientific method to obtain objective, measurable data regarding its effects. Without this rigorous testing, we are left

with anecdotal reports of how these therapies affect patients, and these reports may be subject to biases that obscure the true benefit (or lack thereof) of the therapy in question.

In my view, it would not be surprising if some percentage of alternative therapies is beneficial. For example, many of these therapies involve the use of plant-based materials. Given the fact that many "conventional" therapies (i.e., drugs) have their origin in plant-based materials, it is not outrageous to think that some of these non-traditional therapies may be beneficial. Given the long history of the use of some of these therapies, I think that it would be closed minded to ignore these long-standing experiences; and that at the very least, such a breadth of experience should engender a desire to scientifically investigate their potential benefits.

An important thing to consider is that it is possible that some alternative medical practices may be harmful to patients in some situations. When medical professionals make decisions regarding therapy for their patients, they compare the risk of a given therapy with its potential benefit. The ideal therapy would provide benefit without any risk to the patient. The antithesis of this would be a therapy that provides no benefit and is harmful to the patient. If a therapy provides neither benefit nor risk, its use may result in wasted effort and undue financial expense. Without objectively knowing what these potential benefits and risks are, this comparison is problematic.

Given the lack of scientific investigation of many alternative therapies, many clinicians do not feel comfortable recommending their use. It is important to point out, though, that with increased investigation of alternative therapies, we may discover that some, if not many, are beneficial. If this is the case, these therapies may then become more accepted by the "conventional" medical establishment. It is encouraging to know that studies of the effects of alternative therapies are underway in many laboratories, and I think it's important to keep our minds open when interpreting the results of these important studies.

I hope my two cents has been helpful, and I look forward (as I am sure you do) to what the future holds as we carefully investigate the potential benefits of alternative medical therapy.

—Best regards, Elizabeth ❖

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