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Wheezing, gagging may be asthma in cat

Smidget is an active and full-figured, 15-pound cat with asthma. I received a phone call the other day from her owner, Mrs. Motley, who had moved to Connecticut. She called to talk about treatment options



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THE CAT DOC

for managing Smidget's asthma, because when it flares the cat gags, wheezes and becomes lethargic. Mrs. Motley faces two challenges with Smidget – safely managing asthma, and trying to get medication into the cat. As far as Smidget is concerned, no one at home is going to medicate her orally, so her asthma is treated with long-acting cortisone injections given by her local veterinarian.

These injections rarely cause side effects in cats, but occasionally they trigger the development of diabetes mellitus, especially in overweight cats. Since Smidget falls into this high-risk category, her owner wanted to know what else she could do to manage the condition. Smidget's response to injectable cortisone has become shorter, so the frequency of injections has increased.

Asthma is inflammation of the bronchi, which are airways in the lungs. The airways swell and become full of secretions, limiting

the amount of air that is able to pass, and creating respiratory distress.

Untreated asthma can progress and become life-threatening. Cats with mild asthma cough and gag, and owners frequently report that they think their cat is trying to spit up a hairball, but nothing comes up.

More advanced asthma causes audible wheezing, abdominal press breathing, and even open mouth breathing. Treatment focuses on decreasing inflammation and constriction of the bronchi with cortisone and bronchodilators. The antihistamine cyproheptadine and the human asthma medication zafirlukast are useful in some feline patients.

Managing chronic asthmatics becomes more complicated, especially in cases like Smidget's. Human inhalers are proving successful in many cases. Inhalers deliver drugs directly to the lungs where they work locally and without the side effects of drugs that enter the circulation either orally or by injection.

Cortisone inhalers are used initially, and bronchodilator inhalers are added if needed.

The drawbacks of using inhalers are that they are expensive and difficult to administer. Asking your cat to breathe in deeply after you squirt an inhaler is not feasible, so there is a product called AeroKat with a special chamber and mask.

The chamber contains a one-way valve that keeps

the aerosolized drug inside until the cat takes a few breaths. The technique takes some practice, but willing owners can be taught, and their cats will comply. Mrs. Motley was very interested in the inhaler, so I hope she and her vet are able to treat Smidget successfully.

Unless a specific allergen or environmental irritant is identified and removed, most cases of asthma recur. Allergy testing and hyposensitization are other ideas for helping asthmatic cats. Cigarette smoke, cat litter and home remodeling projects have been implicated as causes of asthma.

Asthma cannot be properly diagnosed without chest X-rays. Conditions that appear similar are heart disease, heartworms, pneumonia, diaphragmatic hernias and fluid in the chest cavity.

Many asthmatic cats have fairly normal chest X-rays, but it is important to rule out the other conditions because their treatments are dramatically different.

Early recognition of asthma is extremely helpful, because response to treatment will be better and the cat will be comfortable faster. If your cat has a couple of episodes of an unproductive cough or gag, don't ignore it – the cause could be feline asthma.

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