



Elizabeth Eilers, DVM Cat Clinic of Greensboro

Dr. Elizabeth Eilers is a Greensboro native and a 1999 graduate of NCSU College of Veterinary Medicine. She has been at the Cat Clinic since 2003 and became the owner in 2010. Before moving back to Greensboro, Dr. Eilers practiced small animal and emergency medicine in Wilmington, NC and Southern California. She enjoys getting to know her patients and their

owners, and loves the challenge and fun of feline medicine. She and her husband Pat enjoy riding their bikes on the trails, and just about any sport on the water. They share their home with a minnow-hunting dog named Tsali and a lovable cat named Chuck Norris.

FELINE ASTHMA

What can be done for my wheezing cat?

Q Why is my cat wheezing and coughing?

A Wheezing, coughing, decreased activity and respiratory distress are all clinical signs a cat may show when suffering from asthma. Cats can develop asthma, or allergic bronchitis, from allergies, parasites, infections and exposure to environmental contaminants. While there can be other causes of coughing, such as heartworms, chronic bronchial disease or heart disease, we will limit this discussion mainly to asthma.

Q What is asthma?

A Asthma is one type of bronchial disease that affects the lower airway. Asthma can be intermittent and mild or can be chronic and life threatening. Typically, it is a disease that causes spasming and narrowing of the airways and can lead to an accumulation of mucus and cellular debris which restricts airflow. Asthma is very treatable, but depending on the cause for each individual cat, some treatments can be ongoing.



Cat receiving a treatment using an AeroKat inhaler

Q How is asthma diagnosed?

A thorough history and physical examination are important first steps to take. Many cats will have an audible wheeze that can be heard with (and sometimes without) a stethoscope. Some owners describe seeing their cat sitting in a hunched position with their neck extended and coughing. Many owners think their cat is trying to cough up a hairball.

Tests useful in diagnosing asthma include radiographs, or x-rays to look for lung changes, bloodwork to evaluate allergic responses, and tracheal washings to collect cells from the airways. Heartworm testing is also recommended because the symptoms of heartworms can mimic asthma. Blood work can be helpful if the cat has changes that may be consistent with an allergic response. In some cases, tracheal washing and bronchoscopy can be performed, in which cells and fluid from inside the bronchi are obtained and examined under a microscope to determine what types of cells are present in the lower airway.

Q How is asthma treated?

A Steroids are needed to help reduce the inflammation that is caused by asthma. Because chronic inflammation and the accumulation of mucus and cells within the bronchi can allow bacteria to grow, antibiotics may be prescribed as well. Bronchodilators and antihistamines are also used in some cases to help open the airways and reduce hypersensitivity reactions. Typically, medications are given orally but many cats respond very well to the use of inhalers. A specially designed face mask is used to deliver the medication directly to the lungs, reducing the systemic effect of some kinds of medications. With a little training, cats can become tolerant of this procedure and many owners find it easy to administer.

Q What else can I do to help my asthmatic cat?

A An important component to helping your cat is to reduce exposure to environmental contaminants that can trigger an asthma attack. Common culprits include: Dust, mold, pollen, dander, cigarette smoke, air fresheners, carpet deodorizers and dust from some types of cat litter. Cats with allergies to local pollens and plants can also have more frequent episodes of asthma during these times, so reducing exposure during their peak season is helpful.

Most cats with asthma can be well controlled with proper treatment. If you feel your cat is having trouble breathing, it is important to take him to your veterinarian immediately. Some cases of asthma can be extreme and potentially life-threatening.



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