



Feline hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is a hormonal condition, involving an over activity of the thyroid glands. It is the most commonly diagnosed hormonal condition in cats and tends to occur in middle to old age, with 95% of cases being over 10 years old.

The thyroid glands are a pair of glands, located in the neck. They produce a hormone called thyroxine, which is responsible for maintaining the body's metabolism.

In the majority of cases (97%), the condition is caused by a benign growth in one or both of the thyroid glands. Whilst benign the growth often produces thyroxine at a very high rate, which leads to increased levels of thyroxine in the blood.

Thyroxine drives the body's metabolism and so hyperthyroid cats effectively go into 'overdrive'. Typically, they have an increased appetite, whilst at the same time losing weight. Drinking levels can increase and there may be vomiting and/or diarrhoea. Sometimes, the owners may witness a personality change, such as increased activity or aggression. On clinical examination, we may find that the enlarged gland is palpable in the neck and the heart rate may be increased. If left unchecked thyroxine may eventually have a detrimental effect on the heart and so a few cases may present with heart failure. It is important to realise though that not all cats will show all these signs and it is far more common to see various combinations.

In most cases a simple blood test to measure the level of thyroxine will allow confirmation of this condition.

There are currently four treatment options available in the UK; medical management with daily tablets, surgery to remove the affected thyroid gland, radio-iodine treatment that destroys the overactive thyroid tissue and a prescription diet with restricted levels of iodine.