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Diabetes in Dogs and Cats

Diabetes mellitus is a common disease in both pets and people. This article will review the common signs associated with diabetes in cats and dogs, as well as the treatment options available.

The most common sign of diabetes in cats and dogs is an increase in water consumption. This is associated with an increase in urine output. Many owners may seek veterinary care because their dog is having "accidents" in the house, or their cat box needs to be changed frequently. Some pets will start eating more, or losing weight with a good appetite. Occasionally the signs are subtle, and owners may just sense their pet "isn't right". A unique feature of diabetes in dogs is that it leads to cataract formation. Many of our canine diabetic patients present for blindness, or because their caretaker noted they were developing cataracts. In the most extreme cases, pets can develop life-threatening ketosis, or an increase in the blood's acidity. These pets can collapse and become unresponsive. Ketosis can progress to death if the pet is not seen immediately. Fortunately, ketosis is rare, and most of our clients detect changes in their pet well before it develops.

Many people are familiar with the human forms of diabetes, often called "juvenile onset" or "Type 1" and "adult-onset" or "Type 2". Juvenile onset diabetes has a low heritability, and is the result of a lack of insulin. This type of diabetes requires daily insulin injections. Adult onset diabetes is often linked to obesity, and is inherited in many families. This type of diabetes is the result of a decrease in the body's ability to respond to insulin. Type 2 diabetes is treated with dietary change, weight loss, exercise, oral medication and occasionally, injectable insulin. Our pets seem to suffer from similar forms of diabetes, although Type 1 is much more common than Type 2.

Many of the same principles used to treat human diabetics are used to treat our pets with diabetes. We often change the diet, monitor exercise and encourage weight loss in overweight pets. Unfortunately, the oral hypoglycemic agents used so widely in people have been less successful in cats and dogs. Almost all of our animal diabetics receive insulin injections. There are many different insulin preparations available, and different types work better in some pets than others. Your veterinarian may try several types to determine which one works best in your dog or cat. Although intimidating at first, most pet owners quickly become experts at administering insulin injections!

Once a pet is diagnosed with diabetes, they require close monitoring by their veterinarian. A recent study showed that on average, a pet will have one to two illnesses per year that are related to their diabetes. However, with diligent care, many diabetic pets live active and healthy lives for many years.