

Diabetes

Diabetes, extremely common in people, is also a very common disease in cats and dogs. Predisposition for diabetes includes obesity, genetic factors, poor diet, hormonal abnormalities, stress and certain drugs. In dogs, females are affected twice as often as males and in cats, diabetes affects males more than females.

All food consumed, by a person, cat or dog, is eventually converted to sugar (glucose). Sugar is carried in the blood to all organs and cells in the body as an energy source. Insulin, produced by the pancreas, carries the sugar from the blood stream into a cell's interior. Life is not possible without insulin. Without insulin, sugar cannot feed the cells of the body and the cells begin to starve.

There are two common forms of diabetes. Insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus (IDDM), type I diabetes, and juvenile-type diabetes are the names for the form of diabetes in which an individual produces absolutely no insulin. Non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus (NIDDM), type II diabetes and adult-onset diabetes mellitus are the names for the form of diabetes in which an individual has insulin but either does not have enough or has a condition that interferes with insulin function.

Approximately 60 percent of diabetic cats have type I while 40 percent have type II. Virtually 100 percent of dogs diagnosed with diabetes have type I.

An animal with diabetes mellitus will exhibit some or all of the following symptoms: weakness, increased thirst, frequent urination, rapid weight loss, depression, lethargy, vomiting and abdominal pain. The animal may also show signs of either increased hunger or loss of appetite. In some dogs, sudden development of blindness due to cataract formation may also indicate diabetes. Some cats may develop a condition of weakness in the hind legs called diabetic neuropathy.

Instead of sugar being constantly removed from the blood and used by the body's cells, a person, cat or dog will have sugars accumulate in the blood. While sugar is concentrating in the blood, the cells of the body are starving. The body starts trying to get the food it needs to survive by increasing hunger and/or breaking down stored fats and muscle tissue. Excess sugar in the blood spills over into the kidneys. A pet may become no longer "housebroken" as the kidneys try to flush excess sugars out. The diabetic will drink excessive amounts of fluid trying to replace the huge amounts of fluids lost by the kidneys. The body does not recognize the lack of insulin, only the lack of energy (sugar). Obvious signs common to all diabetics are they will drink excessively, urinate excessively, eat excessively and will LOSE weight rapidly.

Blood testing easily makes the diagnosis of diabetes. Testing is necessary as the signs and symptoms are not exclusive to diabetes. Once the diagnosis has been made, the hard work for a cat or dog begins.

Treating diabetes mellitus is not easy. A veterinarian's skill, owner commitment and plain luck are required to treat an animal suffering diabetes mellitus. The most important goal in treatment is for a happy and stable life. No diabetic pet will ever be normal again, regardless of the treatment. Virtually 100 percent of diabetic dogs will develop cataracts and become blind within the first 6 months to 24 months. While a dire condition of diabetes, many dogs tolerate blindness relatively well. Don't give up on your pet. There are several insulin hormone replacement therapies available for your pet. Despite requiring insulin, your pet can live a healthy life.

All diabetic cats and dogs do best with a good commercial pet food given in two equal sized meals. Cats who normally "graze" all day can be allowed to continue eating this way. High-fiber foods may be of benefit but are not critical to your diabetic pet. Your veterinarian will help get your pet's diet under control.

Treating type II diabetes in animals follows the same cornerstones as with humans. The cornerstones include weight control, exercise, change in diet, increase fiber content and decreasing simple sugars.

Treating type I diabetes requires insulin by injection to live. There are several types of injected insulin. Some are potent but last only a short period of time while others are less potent but longer lasting. One type of insulin may work for your pet while another may not. Some pets will require insulin doses twice a day, some may do well with only one a day. The determination of which type and the correct dose of insulin for your pet takes time.

If your pet has the above signs and symptoms, seek veterinary care immediately. While there is no cure for diabetes mellitus, it is possible to control the disease. Treatment requires a commitment of time and management from you for the rest of your pet's life. Your veterinarian will be able to discuss with you the best course to take for your diabetic pet.