

# Feline Asthma

- Feline asthma can be a life-threatening condition.
- Affected cats show signs of breathing difficulty, coughing, and wheezing.
- Long-term treatment is often necessary to control the clinical signs and promote easier breathing.

### What Is Feline Asthma?

Feline asthma is a respiratory condition that involves constriction and inflammation of the airways in the lungs. Any cat can develop asthma. The underlying cause of asthma remains unknown, but allergens in the air have been implicated in some cases. When a cat develops asthma, mucus forms in the respiratory tract, and the airway walls swell and spasm. These changes can cause wheezing, coughing, and difficulty breathing. Without treatment, a severe asthma attack can even be fatal.

### Signs of Feline Asthma

- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Lethargy (tiredness)
- Open-mouth breathing
- Difficulty breathing

Clinical signs of feline asthma can occur very quickly or more slowly over a period of days or weeks. Mild clinical signs may be limited to occasional coughing. Some cats also vomit or stop eating. A severe asthma attack can be associated with signs such as open-mouth breathing with the neck extended and exaggerated chest movements as the cat struggles to breathe. Severe asthma attacks are considered a medical emergency. If you suspect that your cat is having breathing problems, contact your veterinarian immediately.

The clinical signs associated with feline asthma can resemble those of other respiratory problems. For example, feline heartworm disease can cause asthma-like clinical signs known as *HARD* (heartworm-associated respiratory disease). Heart disease,

bronchitis, and respiratory infections can cause clinical signs similar to those of feline asthma.

### Diagnosis of Feline Asthma

No single test can diagnose feline asthma. Diagnosis often starts by evaluating your cat's medical history for episodes of occasional coughing, wheezing, or abnormal breathing. Physical examination may reveal a cough when the throat is rubbed, wheezing over the trachea (a large airway in your cat's neck),

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and abnormal sounds when your veterinarian listens to your cat's lungs using a stethoscope. In some cases, wheezing and abnormal lung sounds can even be heard without using a stethoscope.

An x-ray of a cat with asthma may show an abnormal pattern in the lungs. However, in some cases, the x-rays appear normal.

Asthma can look similar to other respiratory diseases, such as heartworm infection, heart disease, and respiratory infection, so your veterinarian may recommend special tests to help rule out those conditions.

### Treatment of Feline Asthma

There is no cure for feline asthma. Treatment focuses on administering medications that open up (or dilate) the airways, reduce inflammation, and promote easier breathing.

**Asthma attack:** If your cat is experiencing an asthma attack, contact your veterinarian immediately for treatment. Keeping your cat calm is very important during transport, as an excited cat may have even more difficulty breathing. When you arrive, your veterinarian will administer medications to help dilate

## Common Conditions

your cat's airways, reduce inflammation, and help your cat breathe easier. Oxygen therapy is also sometimes necessary. If your cat is having a serious asthma attack, your veterinarian may recommend hospitalization for continued treatment and observation.

**Maintenance treatment:** Cats that are diagnosed with asthma usually require long-term medical treatment. Medications are available to dilate the airways, reduce inflammation, and promote easier breathing. There is even a cat inhaler that can be used to relieve asthma attacks. After evaluating

your cat, your veterinarian will recommend the best medications to control your cat's asthma.

Although the underlying cause of asthma is often unknown, some veterinarians recommend trying to remove potential allergens like dust, aerosols, and smoke from the cat's environment. A common source of dust can be cat litter. Fortunately, you can find low-dust brands of cat litter at many pet stores and retail outlets. In addition, using an air purifier that contains a HEPA filter may help to remove allergens from the air.