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Alternatively Speaking: Managing Winter Urinary Issues In Cats

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As the wind blows, you slosh thru the wet snow and it feels like the cold is getting into your very bones. Yes, its winter in Vermont! As a kid your mother may have warned you to wear a hat and scarf so you don't "catch a cold". In modern times we think we know better, that germs cause illness, not the weather, right? But Chinese medicine put large stock in the effect of environment on our bodies. They mapped out daily and seasonal shifts that occur biologically and used those rhythms to identify areas of imbalance and treat disease. They also described how weather could be the trigger that brings forth an illness in a patient. The type of weather involved gave clues to the nature of the weakness, which helped treat the disease and allowed strengthening to avoid future problems. While outdoor exposure could have the most impact, humidity, temperature, and atmospheric changes affect us and our pets whether inside or out.

Cats with urinary issues are a perfect example of this phenomenon. Veterinarians are fully aware that as the daylight gets shorter in the Fall and Winter, we see more cats with bladder infections and male cats that "block" and can't urinate at all. But why would this be? We know that too little water intake, bladder stones, infections and stress are associated with bladder problems, but these have no seasonal links. Some outdoor cats could suffer more stress cooped up in the winter, but this issue affects cats that never go outside just as often as those that do. There simply is no Western explanation, but alternative approaches that address seasonal impacts on the body can provide a different perspective and more treatment options for what can be a very frustrating, reoccurring issue for cats and their owners.

Why are urinary issues so common, and so difficult to treat in cats? Western medicine can identify and treat bladder stones or infections, but stops there. The root issue, often diet related, creates the opportunity for excess bacteria or stones. Throw in a stress, especially in the winter and viola, you have inflammation and urinary symptoms and are at the vet's office. With all the pharmaceuticals and prescription diets used for these cats, Western medicine ignores the root issues, and therefore sees a tendency for repeated urinary flare-ups. The discomfort implies a urinary infection, yet antibiotics are not effective long-term. Providing a meat-rich, moist diet and addressing any stress is where the focus needs to be.

Emma's case is a good example of how important hydration is for urinary issues. A few winters ago she began going in and out of her litter box more than usual, passing little urine despite repeated attempts. A urine test showed blood, bacteria and despite eating a wet diet she had an extremely high urine concentration. Normally the kidneys let any extra water leave the body via the urine. Without enough 'extra' water, the urine is more concentrated, and that is a problem since salts that stay dissolved in watery urine will turn into solid crystals in concentrated urine. These can cause irritation, allow bacteria to thrive, and bladder stones may form. What a cat eats can also promote crystals in concentrated urine.

Emma did not like to drink water, and with the season change her bladder flared up. She was started on antibiotics along with two herbal formulas. We also began to try to get her to drink more with a kitty water fountain. After a few days she was feeling back to normal. Her follow up urinalysis showed no more blood, but still a good amount of bacteria, white blood cells, crystals and her urine was only a little less concentrated. Because

she was back to her happy self after finishing antibiotics, we tried to stop the herbs. Within a day, all her symptoms were back. We resumed her herbs with a cranberry support and no antibiotic and she was fine within a day. Two weeks later we tried to stop again with the same results. By February her urine test showed no change, so we added a Chinese herb that addresses crystal formation. This did resolve all the crystals and white blood cells in her urine even with the concentrated level. With more water in her food, her urine was a normal dilution and by April she was off all the herbs and supplements. She has had water added to her wet food ever since, without any return of issues.

Why did we not simply continue antibiotics for Emma, after her initial prescription, even though she had ongoing bacteria elevations in her urine? The main reason was that it was not needed. The bacteria were not causing her problem, their presence was simply evidence that her bladder was not healthy. From a Chinese perspective, antibiotics used repeatedly as a sole therapy can perpetuate the root cause of bladder problems. Herbal formulas address these root issues, and are very effective treatments for bladder disease.

With Emma, the herbs made her comfortable and we had the time to adjust her diet for long term success. But sometimes the situation is more immediately urgent. This is most often true when a male cat has a bladder problem. Boy cats have a narrower passageway for urine compared to girls, which can spasm shut from pain or clog with crystals and infection matter. Being unable to urinate is a medical emergency and can be fatal within a day or two. Because of this, male cats have to be monitored more closely for proper urine habits. Their treatment is the same as for girls if caught early, but once they can't urinate, then resolving the immediate crisis is the focus. Often this involves placing a urinary catheter under anesthesia to allow urine flow until inflammation and infection can be resolved. However, if the problem is just a spasm and not a physical plug of debris, sometimes they can be treated medically.

This was the case for Wes, a kitty very sensitive to stress. He was eating a dry diet , and several years ago in the Fall he began staying in the litter box longer than usual. His owner noticed that he was passing very little urine, and then would bolt out of the box and lick himself. We examined him and found his bladder was very full despite all his attempts to go to the bathroom. We treated him with acupuncture and a relaxing aromatherapy, and within minutes we were able to empty his bladder with some gentle pressure. He was hospitalized and treated with herbs, homeopathics, antibiotics and acupuncture and showed no signs of needing to urinate frequently. He went home on the same and was slowly changed over to a canned food diet. He blocked again once in October off his herbs, but responded again to the same treatment. Wes' owner is diligent in monitoring his urinary habits and in times of stress gives him herbs, homeopathics, and increases water in his diet. He made a full recovery and other than one mild flare up that was managed at home, he has been free of any bladder issues. He is currently not on any therapy other than his moist diet.

For both Wes and Emma, their success was due to close monitoring. Cats do not show symptoms as clearly as dogs when they do not feel well. Small changes in their normal routines are important signs of trouble. Certainly if they are visiting their litter box more often, or urinating in odd places, see your veterinarian immediately. A complete physical and history will check for any cause of stress that may have triggered the issue. A urine test can evaluate for crystals, concentration, white blood cells and blood. Xrays can check for bladder stones. Antibiotics may be part of the therapy, but in our experience they are not always needed and certainly most cats do best if the other root issues are addressed. A natural wet diet is a great management tool for urinary issues, but not fast enough to deal with a cat in the middle of a crisis. Acupuncture, herbs and homeopathy address inflammatory issues quickly, soothing discomfort and sometimes can 'unblock' cats without surgery.

Since we would all prefer to keep our feline friends from suffering from bladder issues in the first place, prevention is the best approach. Cats on all dry food typically have urines so concentrated they are classified as borderline dehydrated, mainly because the water they drink goes to the digestive tract to hydrate the food instead of

their tissues. So for a species prone to bladder and kidney issues, providing a fluid rich diet is a great place to start with prevention. Next is to identify sources of emotional stress. These may seem small, such as schedule changes, vacations, new pets or guests, and even outdoor cats that may indirectly stress an indoor cat. Changing foods quickly, especially from wet to dry, can cause a bladder issue in a matter of days in a cat already primed for that issue. Be aware of these possible pitfalls especially in the winter months and talk to your veterinarian about ways to help keep your cat feeling safe and secure so his or her bladder does not get inflamed as a result of stress. A little prevention and vigilance for how your kitty is acting can go a long way to keep this winter filled with happy days purring by the fire, not in the hospital.

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she practices both conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. Her associate Dr. Betty Jo Black brings classical homeopathy to the practice. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at www.chelseaanimalhospital.com

4 Legs and a Tail Winter 2015