

Feline Hyperthyroidism Frequently Asked Questions, Information About Overactive Thyroid Conditions in Cats

[by Mary Shomon](#)

What is hyperthyroidism?

The thyroid is a butterfly shaped gland located on either side of a cat's windpipe. The thyroid produces hormones that regulate metabolism and organ function. With hyperthyroidism, the thyroid becomes overactive, and produces an excess of thyroid hormone.

How do cats get hyperthyroidism?

The main way cats develop hyperthyroidism is due to development of a benign tumor, known as an adenoma, in their thyroid gland. The tumor secretes excess thyroid hormone, creating the condition of hyperthyroidism.

How common is hyperthyroidism in cats?

Hyperthyroidism is one of the most common endocrine conditions affecting cats, in particular, older cats over the age of 10. The median age for acquiring hyperthyroidism is approximately 13 years of age, and very few cats develop the condition before the age of 10. Some veterinarians estimate that about 2% of cats over 10 will develop hyperthyroidism, and, due to factors that may include environmental exposures, that number is on the rise.

Is hyperthyroidism dangerous?

Untreated, hyperthyroidism in cats can lead to heart failure or kidney failure and can be fatal.

What are the symptoms of hyperthyroidism in cats?

- Weight loss (typical, but not always)
- Increased appetite without weight gain
- Vomiting and diarrhea
- Increased energy and friskiness
- More vocalization
- Demanding food more frequently
- Drinking more water
- More frequent urination
- Decreased appetite (less common, but can be a symptom)
- Decreased activity (less common, but can be a symptom)
- Weakness (less common, but can be a symptom)
- Labored breathing and panting (less common, but can be a symptom)

How is hyperthyroidism in cats diagnosed?

Primarily, diagnosis is made by blood test, measuring the level of thyroxine (T4) in the blood. High T4 levels are considered indicative of hyperthyroidism. Occasionally, if results are not conclusive, a more definitive -- and costly -- test known as Free T-4 may be run. And, some veterinarian will use other tests including T3 levels, T3 suppression test, thyrotropin-releasing hormone stimulation test, and thyroid radionuclide uptake and imaging ("thyroid scans"), to verify a hyperthyroidism diagnosis.

What is involved in antithyroid therapy?

Antithyroid therapy is the treatment of choice for many practitioners and cat owners, because it's non-invasive, and inexpensive. Antithyroid drug therapy involves putting the cat on the drug methimazole -- brand name [Tapazole](#) -- a human antithyroid drug. Downsides are that in some cats, it does not resolve the hyperthyroidism, and giving the cat a pill daily for life may be difficult. A small percentage of cats have some lethargy and vomiting as side effects. Typical cost of antithyroid drug therapy is \$25 a month for life.