

Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD)

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FLUTD, or Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease, is a term used for different problems that affect a cat's bladder and urethra (the tube which carries urine/pee from the bladder to the outer body). This can include things like bladder inflammation, bladder stones, and blockages in the urethra. These problems can make it hard or painful for a cat to pee.

Cats often show similar symptoms, even if the cause is different, so extra tests are usually needed to find out what's wrong. The upper urinary tract (kidneys and the tubes that carry urine to the bladder) is usually not affected, except in severe cases. Stress and lifestyle are believed to play an important role in many cases of FLUTD.

Signs

Cats with FLUTD usually show one or more of the following signs:

- difficulty and pain when passing pee
- passing small amounts of pee more frequently
- passing pee outside of the litter tray
- straining before, during or after peeing
- passing bloody pee
- crying when passing pee
- behavioural changes and/or aggression
- inability to pass any pee (this is an emergency, see 'Urinary obstruction' section further on)

Causes

Feline idiopathic cystitis (FIC)

This is the most common cause of FLUTD in cats, causing around 60 to 70% of cases. It causes a painful inflammation of the bladder with no specific underlying cause and there is no infection. Stress is thought to play an important role.

Stones

Small stones can form in the bladder and move into the urethra. Within the bladder they can cause pain and discomfort, although this will not always be obvious. Stones within the urethra can cause a blockage and stop pee being able to leave the body.

Bacterial infection

Urinary tract infections aren't the most common cause of FLUTD, but they can still occur, especially in cats over the age of 10 years old, or those with other health problems like kidney disease or diabetes.

Cancer

Cancer of the bladder or urethra is uncommon but can occur, especially in older cats.

Urethral obstruction

The passage of pee through the urethra can be blocked by stones, by a tightening of the urethral wall known as a spasm, or by a collection of blood, protein and dead cells called a plug. This is an emergency, see 'Urinary obstruction' section.

Abnormal structure of the urinary tract

Rarely, cats may be born with changes to the bladder or urethra which can cause ongoing problems.

Those cats most susceptible

FLUTD can be seen in male and female cats of any age, although it is more often seen in cats who:

- are middle-aged
- are overweight
- are inactive
- remain mostly indoors
- eat a dry food diet
- are neutered

Male cats are much more likely to develop a blockage of the urethra. Older cats, and cats with diabetes or kidney disease, are more susceptible to urinary tract infections.

Diagnosis

Although most cats with signs of FLUTD have feline idiopathic cystitis, this can only be diagnosed when other known causes have been ruled out.

Your vet will talk to you to find out as much as possible about your cat, their signs and when they are showing them. Your vet will examine your cat to feel their bladder and assess the other organs.

If possible, a pee sample can be collected and examined to determine its concentration, acidity and the presence of any crystals, protein, blood cells and bacteria.

If your cat is otherwise well, treatment is often started based on the initial examination, but if the signs recur or do not improve, further investigations will be required. This may include x-rays or ultrasound examinations to assess the bladder, urethra and kidneys. Rarely, it may be necessary for a tissue sample of the bladder to be taken for examination at a laboratory.

Treatment

Treatment of FLUTD should be directed towards the underlying cause if one has been diagnosed. If no specific cause can be identified, it is important to treat the signs and address long-term management. The following may help.

Pain relief

There are several different types of pain relief available which can help with pain and inflammation of the urinary tract. Your vet will prescribe these based on your cat's symptoms.

Increasing water intake

Drinking more will help to dilute your cat's pee. This will help with all causes of cystitis.

Always ensure there is free access to water plus the following tips may help:

- changing your cat's diet to wet food, or moistening dry food
- using water fountains
- allow them to drink from a dripping or running tap
- using ceramic bowls, as plastic or metal may taint the water
- supplying multiple bowls or glasses of water and placing these throughout the house
- using distilled/filtered/bottled water or flavoured broths. Check with your vet to ensure the flavouring is safe

Reducing stress

Stress is thought to have an important role in FLUTD. A major cause of stress in cats is other cats. This can be cats that they live with, especially where they aren't bonded, or where there aren't enough essential items such as litter trays, resting places and food and water bowls for each cat.

Stress can also be caused by other cats that live in the same area. When cats are toileting, either within the home or outdoors, they are especially vulnerable. Stress can also arise from changes in their diet or environment, owner stress or new animals or people in the home.

Stress associated with going to the toilet is particularly important.

- Litter trays should be placed in a quiet location away from the sight and sound of other cats, pets and people
- Trays should be large, high sided and deep filled with a comfortable litter
- Provide one tray per cat, plus an extra
- Place litter trays away from each other so cats have a choice of quiet locations to use
- Trays should be checked for poo a couple of times a day. Clumping litter will also allow pee to be frequently removed
- The litter should be fully changed once to twice a week
- Cats with outdoor access should still have an indoor tray provided, as other cats in the area may target them when toileting

For more information see cats.org.uk/cat-stress

Controlled weight loss and increased exercise

Cats who are overweight and less active are more likely to develop FLUTD, so addressing these problems may help in the longer-term control of the condition.

Diet

As well as changing to a wet food, some cats will benefit from a prescription food, especially those with stones or crystals in their pee. Diets help control the acidity of the pee and reduce levels of substances which contribute to crystal and stone formation. They can also help the pee to be more dilute. For some urinary stones, diet alone can cause the stones to dissolve. Other types of stones will need surgery to remove them.

Supplements

These may help repair the protective inner lining of the bladder.

Behaviour medications

These may be needed in severe or ongoing cases where stress cannot be reduced sufficiently in other ways.

Antibiotics

These will be recommended where a bacterial infection has been confirmed. Pee will need to be examined under the microscope, and ideally, bacteria then grown in a lab to find out which antibiotic is best to treat the infection.

Urinary obstruction

If the urethra (the tube that carries pee from the bladder to the outside of the body) becomes blocked, this is an emergency. Pee will fill the bladder and then start to back up into the kidneys. This can cause a cat's kidneys to become damaged, stop working, and can be fatal.

This is most common in male cats. It is often called a 'blocked bladder', or they may be referred to as a 'blocked cat'. They may not have shown any problems prior to blocking. At first, cats show signs of trying to pee but not passing any pee. They may vocalise and seem distressed. However, sometimes this can be missed if a cat toilets outdoors or an owner is out. It may also be mistaken for constipation. Once a cat's kidneys start to be damaged, they will be unwell, quiet, depressed and reluctant to move or eat.

Urgent veterinary care is needed. A vet will examine your cat and feel the bladder to see if there are signs of a blockage.

Cats suffering from this condition will need to have a general anaesthetic so that the urethra can be unblocked. This is performed using a soft piece of medical tubing called a urinary catheter. The catheter may be left in place while a cat recovers to allow the pee to flow. Cats will need pain relief and supportive care to help the kidneys to recover, including fluids given into the bloodstream. Cats normally have to stay at the vets for a few days and may need monitoring including repeat blood tests to make sure they are recovering.

The future

The prognosis of FLUTD depends on the underlying cause and how each cat responds to treatment. Most cats with FLUTD will lead a relatively normal life with lifestyle changes, stress reduction and occasional long-term treatment. Treatments for feline idiopathic cystitis generally relieve the symptoms, rather than curing the condition. You may need to try a combination of lifestyle changes and medical treatment to find the best options for your cat.

Looking for cat advice?

The following vet-approved guides
are available to download from
cats.org.uk/information-leaflets

Essential guides

Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour W84009

Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour W84010

Bringing your cat home W84002

Caring for your cat W84001

Caring for your kitten W84015

Cats and people W84014

Cats living together W84011

Elderly cats W84016

End-of-life, grief and loss W84007

Feeding and obesity W84004

Feral cats W84017

Indoor and outdoor cats W84012

Keeping your cat safe W84005

Microchipping W84008

Moving home W84003

Neutering W84006

Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens W84018

Veterinary guides

Arthritis W83201

Cat flu W83216

Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea W83218

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) W83209

Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) W83202

Fleas and other parasites W83215

Heart murmurs and heart disease W83211

Hyperthyroidism W83212

Infectious disease and vaccination W83217

Kidney or renal disease W83206

Skin disorders W83204

Teeth and oral health W83214

Please see cats.org.uk for more information on:

Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis

Cats and the law

Cats with disabilities

Diabetes

Feline asthma

Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)

Feline parvovirus (FPV)

Hypertension

You and your vet

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