

ORAH Info:

Caring for your pet with chronic kidney disease.



Chronic kidney disease (slow, irreversible changes in the kidneys that cause them to fail over time) is one of the most common health problems of older cats. It is also often seen in older dogs. The primary cause, in most cases, is unknown.

SYMPTOMS

Pets with kidney disease generally drink more and urinate more. They are more prone to urinary tract infections because their urine is more dilute than normal. They also tend to have a reduced appetite, due to their general state of ongoing mild dehydration and to the buildup of toxins in their bodies which normally would be removed by the kidneys. This leads to gradual, steady weight loss. Sometimes we are first alerted to the possibility of kidney disease when animals have a “uremic crisis,” where they have a bout of depression and decreased appetite, sometimes with vomiting and diarrhea. Pets will sometimes even stop drinking at these times. At other times, cats and dogs with kidney disease seem almost normal, and the external signs are very subtle.

DIAGNOSIS

Kidney disease is generally easy to diagnose with bloodwork and urine testing. It is important to look at urine test results along with blood results from the same time period. Urine testing can also reveal whether your pet has a urinary tract infection or is losing protein in its urine (a common and potentially life-threatening aspect of some pets' kidney disease, especially in dogs).

In addition, it is a good idea to check blood pressure regularly; the kidneys are an important part of the blood-pressure-regulating system. Elevated blood pressure can lead to a number of harmful effects, including blindness from retinal detachment.

Sometimes an abdominal ultrasound and/or x-rays can help us look at the kidneys and rule out other causes of kidney failure, such as cancer.

Rechecking these tests at regular intervals helps us provide better care for your pet.

TREATMENTS

Many of these are geared to keeping pets eating, since slowing down their ongoing weight loss helps them feel better longer.

Diet: Studies have shown that a special veterinary diet that is lower in protein and has the right balance of other nutrients can actually help your pet with kidney disease live longer and have fewer bouts of lethargy, poor appetite, and upset stomach. Examples of these foods include Hill's k/d and Purina NF.

Stomach protectors: These include Pepcid AC (famotidine), Carafate (sucralfate), Prilosec (omeprazole) and others. Animals with kidney disease are prone to ulcerations of the mouth and stomach, which reduce their appetites and lead to faster weight loss, hastening the progress of the disease. These medications can help heal these ulcers.

Increasing water consumption: Pets with kidney disease, despite how much we see them drinking, are peeing out so much dilute urine that they are actually in a state of chronic dehydration. Even in its mild form, this leads them to feel worse overall, and to eat less. Mixing water with your pet's food, offering appealing liquids such as low-sodium broth or milk (if well-tolerated; note that some animals are actually lactose-intolerant), or increasing access to water (more and bigger water bowls, pet water fountains) can help fight dehydration and allow your pet to get rid of more of those toxins that build up in his or her system.

Fluid injections: This strategy is helpful for cats and small dogs. Fluids (a sterile balanced electrolyte solution) can be injected under the skin to rehydrate animals with mild-to-moderate dehydration. We do this in the clinic, and we can teach you how to do it at home; it takes about five minutes and most animals are cooperative. Used regularly, this technique helps pets feel better and have better appetites.

Oral appetite stimulants and anti-nausea medications, B12 injections: These are often helpful for many animals with appetite loss.

Erythropoietin (red blood cell stimulating hormone) and iron injections: Anemia (low red blood cell count) is a common problem of pets with kidney disease. Anemia leads to fatigue and a general run-down feeling. Either or both of these treatments may be used to help animals make more red cells.

Potassium supplements: Most dogs and cats with kidney disease are losing potassium in their urine. Low body potassium levels make them feel weak and affect a number of important body functions, including heart function.

ACE inhibitors: These drugs are used mostly in dogs to slow protein loss in their urine. The proteins lost are tiny, but they are important; they prevent over-active clotting of blood, a potentially life-threatening condition.

Blood-pressure lowering medication: Amlodipine is often used in cats, and sometimes in dogs, to control the high blood pressure that tends to go along with kidney disease.

PROGNOSIS

We cannot stop or reverse the progression of chronic kidney disease, but we can lengthen pets' lives (and provide them with a better, more comfortable quality of life) with the supportive treatments listed above. Depending on the stage of kidney disease that your pet is in at diagnosis, he or she may have many years of good, happy life ahead. This is especially true of cats, who often live very comfortably for quite a long time after diagnosis. Early detection of kidney disease gives us the best chance to start supportive care as soon as possible.