URINARY PROBLEMS IN CATS  
(FLUTD, CYSTITIS, “BLADDER INFECTION”; INCLUDING URINARY OBSTRUCTION)

What is it? Cats are very susceptible to irritation of the bladder lining. In young, healthy cats, it is very rare for such irritation to be caused by an infection, although infections can occur and are not extremely rare in elderly cats. In most cases of urinary tract disease in young adult cats, the irritation of the bladder is caused by neurological or even psychological issues, often compounded by dietary factors. In some cases, bladder disease causes an obstruction, which prevents the cat from urinating. Stones can develop in the bladder as a result of other diseases. Bladder diseases can be extremely painful.

Who gets it? FLUTD is very common in young adult cats. It is seen most commonly in overweight cats, neutered male cats, and strictly indoor cats. Urinary obstruction is almost exclusively a problem of male cats.

What are the clinical signs? Owners may notice a cat making frequent visits to the litter box, straining to urinate, crying while urinating, or urinating outside the litter box. Owners may be able to see blood in the urine. Occasionally, owners notice that the cat’s belly seems painful or hard. In cases of urinary obstruction, the cat may strain frequently but produce little or no urine, may become lethargic, may stop eating, or may vomit. If untreated, the obstructed cat may die.

How is it diagnosed? It is necessary to collect a urine sample to identify the cause of the patient’s discomfort. X-rays or ultrasound may be used to look for bladder stones. Urinary obstruction can be diagnosed on physical exam in most cats, but if they are very large or too hostile or painful to allow palpation, x-rays or ultrasound may be needed. When urinary obstruction occurs, other tests are usually needed to fully assess the cat’s condition.

How is it treated? Urinary tract inflammation may be treated with pain medications, medications to ease urination, and increased fluid intake. In cats that are sensitive to diet, a change to a special food may be needed. When infection is present, it is treated with antibiotics. A urinary obstruction has to be physically removed, usually by washing out the cat’s urethra under sedation, and hospitalization for supportive care is usually needed.

What is the aftercare? Owners may need to give the cat medications at home. A special food is often recommended, and it may take some work to get the cat to accept the new diet. It is usually helpful to increase a cat’s fluid intake by switching to a moist food, adding extra water to the food, or making sure that appealing sources of water are always handy. Some cats enjoy drinking from a faucet or a cat fountain, while others may like to lick ice cubes or drink diluted, low-sodium chicken broth or tuna juice. All cats can benefit from a careful review of their lifestyle to look for sources of stress that can be managed or eliminated. All owners need to be watchful for signs of recurrence, especially in male cats that may become obstructed.

What is the prognosis? Unfortunately, lower urinary tract disease is chronic in many cats, meaning that it comes back repeatedly. However, many cats will respond to treatment and have little to no difficulty as long as their special needs are met. Urinary obstruction is life threatening if not treated promptly. In cats who demonstrate repeated obstruction, it is sometimes necessary to resort to a surgical procedure called a perineal urethrostomy (PU) to reduce the risk of obstruction.