



Taking a holistic approach to FLUTD

Amelia Kate LARKINS

DVM, European Technical Communication,
Nestlé PURINA PetCare

Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease (FLUTD) is a painful and sometimes life-threatening condition, often characterised by symptoms such as stranguria, haematuria and pollakiuria. There are several possible underlying causes of FLUTD, the most common of which is Feline Idiopathic Cystitis (FIC), accounting for around 60% of cases. Urinary stones, usually struvite or calcium oxalate, account for a further 20% of cases followed by urethral plugs (15%). For all the main causes of FLUTD, studies have shown that the right nutrition, increasing water intake and environmental management, together as a holistic approach, are key to successful treatment¹.

Diagnosis

Although FIC is the most common cause of FLUTD, it requires a diagnosis of exclusion. Radiography of the entire urinary tract is important to rule out urethroliths and uretheroliths. Ultrasound can be helpful to visualise the bladder wall and rule out rare radiolucent stones. Urinalysis is especially important in older cats, or cats with concurrent diseases, such as diabetes, to check for infection. It also allows identification of crystals, although it should be borne in mind that crystals will form over time and in some cases can be physiological².

Treating FLUTD

Once a diagnosis has been reached, a treatment plan can be put in place. Immediate treatment may include analgesia and antispasmodics, however long term and permanent treatment usually involves management of the home environment and the whole cat, not just the medical treatment of the urinary tract. This encompasses increasing water intake, environmental enrichment and making changes to the diet. Even though cases are rare, bacterial cystitis does occur, and may be difficult to differentiate from FIC. Antimicrobials may be prescribed, following culture and sensitivity, if the initial analgesia and antispasmodics do not have the desired effect.³

Encouraging water intake

Increasing water intake reduces the risk of FLUTD overall. The more dilute the urine, the lower the risk of crystals and proteins forming stones or plugs, and the risk of FIC. Although cats are reluctant drinkers, there are several things owners can do to encourage water intake. Providing wide bowls so that whiskers don't touch the edges can help, and many cats prefer glass or ceramic bowls to plastic- these are also less prone to bacterial growth with frequent cleaning. Having multiple bowls around the house, especially in a multi-cat household where territory disputes may prevent access, is also beneficial. For some cats, a running water source such as a water fountain or dripping tap is preferable.





Environmental management and enrichment

Stress, often caused by environmental factors, is a major risk factor for FIC. Common triggers include changes in routine or disputes with other cats in the household over territory or resources. Stress can be a difficult topic to broach with owners. They can often feel guilty and sometimes there is a lack of understanding around social behaviour of cats. Taking a thorough history and taking the time to understand the owner's home and lifestyle is a good first step towards making changes to the environment.

Where possible, there should be the same number of resources (food and water bowls, beds, etc.) in a household as cats, plus a spare to minimise the chances of conflict between cats. Providing high places to survey the environment from and safe hiding places can also help reduce stress. Good litter tray management- keeping it in a quiet place and cleaning it regularly- is another thing owners can do to help reduce stress⁴.

Cats need stimulation and activity, but it may not be possible or desirable in all cases for owners to let their cat outdoors, so providing lots of mental stimulation and play is important.

It can seem overwhelming to owners to make all the changes at once and some of them might not be possible for every owner. A written plan that is adapted to the owner and their cat can be helpful to gain owners trust and improve compliance⁵.

Feeding a cat with FLUTD: how and what?

Nutrition is important for cats with FLUTD. Cats often have strong food preferences and offering a mix of wet and dry food can be beneficial. Wet food helps to increase water intake, reducing urine specific gravity and increasing urine volume⁶. Dry food can also be beneficial as it can be left down for a longer time at room temperature, allowing cats who have a natural preference for multiple small meals to express this behaviour, which may reduce stress. It can also be used in food dispenser toys, which is a good way to provide environmental enrichment.

A prescription diet will dissolve struvite stones where they are the cause and prevent formation of calcium oxalate stones once any pre-existing stones have been removed⁷. Cats with FIC also require a prescription diet- the calorie moderation is beneficial where increased weight is a risk factor and a precise sodium level can help encourage water intake.

Conclusion

Taking a holistic approach is key to treating FLUTD. It can be challenging when there are many changes to be made to the home environment, however, getting an accurate diagnosis will help in prioritising the changes. By supporting and working closely with the owner to adapt the home and diet, the risk of recurrence can be greatly reduced.

References

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