

## Don't Ignore These Sickness Red Flags in Your Cat

Some owners don't realize their kitties are sick with this condition, & if you wait too long, your pet's prognosis plummets. Don't write these red flags off as fussiness or sleepiness. Check for these other hidden symptoms & get help for your cat right away. Her chance for recovery may depend on it.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Feline cholangiohepatitis is characterized by inflammation of the liver and bile ducts in cats
- Most cholangiohepatitis patients also have at least one coexisting disorder such as inflammatory bowel disease or pancreatitis
- Symptoms of cholangiohepatitis depend on the form it takes, and include fever, a swollen and painful abdomen, dehydration, lack of energy and appetite and intermittent vomiting
- Treatment of this disease depends on its cause; many feline cholangiohepatitis patients are good candidates for an integrative therapeutic approach

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Feline cholangiohepatitis is a word that describes inflammation of the liver and bile ducts in cats. It's a common cause of feline liver disease, especially in the Himalayan, Persian and Siamese breeds. Cholangiohepatitis and hepatic lipidosis (fatty liver disease) make up about two-thirds of all liver disease in cats.

The liver plays a number of important roles in the body, one of the most important of which is to help your cat digest the food she eats by manufacturing and secreting bile. Bile is a greenish brown fluid that travels from the liver through the biliary ducts to the gall bladder, where it's stored until it's needed by the intestines.

When needed by the intestines (usually after a meal containing fat), the gall bladder contracts to push bile through a large duct called the common bile duct into the small intestine, where it supports the digestive process by breaking down dietary fats so they can be absorbed into the body.

Bile serves many other important functions in the body. It kills parasites, promotes peristalsis (the wave-like muscle contractions that move food through the digestive tract) and binds toxins produced by the liver so they can be transported into the intestine and eliminated from the body.

### Types of Cholangiohepatitis

There are three forms of cholangiohepatitis:

1. Suppurative, or pus forming, which often has a sudden onset with fever.
2. Non-suppurative, which is recurrent and has a very poor prognosis.
3. Lymphocytic-plasmacytic, in which lymphocytes and plasma cells invade and surround the liver's portal vein and often also the bile duct and artery of the liver. This form is typically chronic and long lasting, and tends to progress to cirrhosis or scarring of the liver over time.

Regardless of the form it takes, the inflammation and swelling the disease causes inhibits the proper flow of bile, causing it to be retained in the liver and biliary ducts, creating a situation called "stagnant liver." Since bile is a highly acidic digestive fluid, it can cause irritation, congestion, and significant tissue damage when it doesn't flow freely.

## **Most Cats With This Disease Also Suffer From Other Illnesses**

Most kitties who develop cholangiohepatitis also have inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) — about 80% according to one study. Many also have pancreatitis, which is inflammation of the pancreas.

This is because the pancreatic duct that transports digestive enzymes to the intestine opens into the same port as the common bile duct. These two ducts share a common entryway to the intestine, which means if bacteria invade the entryway, both the liver and pancreas can become inflamed and infected.

In IBD, the cells in the intestinal lining become irritated and inflamed, which interferes with nutrient absorption, which in turn alters the populations of bacteria living in the intestine. An overgrowth of bacteria can occur, or more aggressive species of bacteria can take over and quickly invade the bile duct and pancreas. This combination of cholangiohepatitis, inflammatory bowel disease and pancreatitis is often referred to as triaditis, and all three conditions must be addressed if the cat is to fully recover.

## **Symptoms and Causes of Cholangiohepatitis**

Typical signs of suppurative cholangiohepatitis include fever, a swollen and painful abdomen, jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes) and dehydration. Pets with suppurative cholangiohepatitis look and feel very ill. Causes of this form of the disease can be a bacterial infection or the result of a bile duct obstruction or gall bladder blockage.

Non-suppurative cholangiohepatitis symptoms include an enlarged liver, lack of energy and appetite and intermittent vomiting. This form of the disease usually occurs in conjunction with a partial bile duct obstruction, inflammation of the gall bladder, gallstones or gall bladder sludging. It can also occur with pancreatitis or IBD as well.

## **Diagnosing Cholangiohepatitis**

Since the symptoms of feline cholangiohepatitis are common in other serious liver disorders, often several diagnostic tests are necessary to confirm the diagnosis. These tests may include a complete blood count (CBC), blood chemistry profile, urinalysis, bile acid analysis, a blood-clotting test and abdominal X-rays and/or ultrasound.

Often an ultrasound-guided liver biopsy is recommended to confirm the diagnosis and determine what form of cholangiohepatitis is present. However, I don't recommend biopsies on kitties who aren't stable, because the risks can outweigh the benefits.

## Integrative Therapies May Help With Cholangiohepatitis

Treatment depends on the cause of your cat's cholangiohepatitis. If infection or inflammation is present, it must be managed. Sometimes an autoimmune reaction occurs which requires special handling. In most cases, cholagogues are prescribed to thin the bile so it can flow more easily out of the gall bladder.

**Holistic and integrative veterinarians** use a variety of excellent supportive therapies for cholangiohepatitis. We use S-adenosylmethionone (SAMe), vitamin B and E supplements and vitamin K (if needed). Foods rich in vitamin K are provided to address blood-clotting issues, and zinc-rich foods help prevent cirrhosis (scarring of the liver).

Choline, n-acetyl-cysteine (NAC), glandular therapies, milk thistle, dandelion and beet root can also be very beneficial. Hyperbaric oxygen therapy can also be excellent for these patients, if you can find a facility that offers it. We also use homeopathic remedies based on your cat's specific symptoms, and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) as well, which is also customized to a kitty's individual needs.

In TCM, liver disharmony can negatively affect your pet's behavior and contribute to a variety of other symptoms, including eye, bowel, skin and neurologic symptoms. There are very good Chinese herbs that can be effective in reducing liver inflammation regardless of the cause.

Animals who are dehydrated or malnourished may require intravenous (IV) fluids for a period of time. Some cats require a feeding tube, especially if they stop eating, which is dangerous. Sometimes to save a patient's life, a feeding tube is temporarily placed.

Treatment can take three to four months, and regular monitoring of liver enzymes will be required. Animals with non-suppurative cholangiohepatitis typically require long-term therapy, sometimes for the rest of their lives. These are situations in which holistic modalities can be a tremendous blessing.

Often they can completely replace conventional drug protocols for maintenance therapy, or at the very least greatly reduce the amount of drugs needed on a long-term basis. Cats who have a concurrent disease such as IBD, pancreatitis, ductopenia (an inherited lack of liver ducts) or small intestine absorption issues will need to be treated for those conditions as well.

Liver patients do best with an all-natural diet rich in food-based antioxidants, human-grade meats and no synthetic preservatives. Reducing the amount of "extras" that go into your pet's body means you're reducing the workload on the liver, which is the goal.

## Long-Term Outlook

The outlook for kitties with cholangiohepatitis can be unpredictable. Many cats with the suppurative form of the disease who are diagnosed early and properly treated can make a full recovery. Long-term remission is possible in cats with the non-suppurative form of the disease who are diagnosed early and treated promptly.

Sadly, the prognosis is much less optimistic for kitties who aren't diagnosed until the disease is advanced. This can happen when pet parents don't realize their cat is sick, or they wait too long to make an appointment with their veterinarian. This is one of the reasons I recommend you partner with a proactive veterinarian who will suggest regular routine bloodwork to monitor your pet's overall internal health on an ongoing basis.