

Perfectly Normal for Dogs, a Red Flag for Cats

If your cat starts this dog-like behavior, be very suspect. Cats shouldn't do this unless something may be seriously wrong. If the condition persists and happens continuously, please make an appointment with your vet right away.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Unlike dogs, cats don't pant much, if at all
- A panting cat is cause for concern unless the behavior is over quickly and occurs after strenuous exercise or play, after your cat has been outdoors in warm weather or during stressful events such as car rides or vet visits
- In older kitties who pant, the cause is often congestive heart failure, usually as a result of feline heart disease
- In younger and middle-aged cats, panting is often associated with a respiratory disorder such as feline asthma
- If your cat is panting continuously or persistently, it's time to make an appointment with your veterinarian

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Unlike dogs, kitties don't naturally pant, so it can be disconcerting to see little Fluffy breathless, and rightfully so. In most cases, panting in a cat is a sign of an underlying health concern that requires attention. However, there are a few situations in which panting in cats is harmless and short lived. Some cats pant during or after exercise or to try to cool off. Young, energetic kittens might pant for a short time while playing, like this little guy:

Outside of momentary episodes with an obvious cause, panting in cats indicates there's an underlying problem involving either the respiratory tract or the heart. In older kitties who start panting, a potential cause is congestive heart failure. In younger cats, especially those who are also coughing, the more likely cause is a respiratory disorder such as feline asthma.

Congestive Heart Failure as a Cause of Panting in Kitties

When a cat's heart can't pump enough blood to the body, fluid backs up into the lungs, and congestive heart failure is the result. There are many causes of congestive heart failure in cats, but most often it results from hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. Thyroid disease, high blood pressure, birth defects and other conditions can also cause congestive heart failure.

Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM) is by far the most common type of primary heart disease in kitties, accounting for 85% to 90% of all cases. The word "hypertrophic" means thickened, so this is a condition in which the walls and ventricles of the heart become too thick, or hypertrophied.

HCM is often inherited in cats. In fact, there's a test available now for a specific gene mutation in Maine Coons and Ragdolls. Purebred cats such as the Persian, other oriental breeds and American shorthairs are also predisposed to develop the condition. However, it's the regular house cat that is most commonly diagnosed with HCM. Cats usually develop the condition in midlife, but it can occur at any age.

Symptoms of feline hypertrophic cardiomyopathy vary and depend to some extent on the severity of the disease. Cats with mild disease don't necessarily have symptoms. But in a kitty with significant HCM, there are usually obvious signs.

As we know, kitties mask illness very well, so until this condition is severe, even a cat with significant disease may have no symptoms, or very mild symptoms that don't seem to be indicative of heart disease. In cats with obvious symptoms, there can be respiratory distress caused by congestive heart failure, or leg paralysis due to a blood clot.

Cats suffering congestive heart failure don't cough like people or dogs do. Instead, they tend to breathe through an open mouth, and sometimes they pant. You should watch for breathing difficulties during exertion. Some kitties with HCM and congestive heart failure have a hard time walking any distance without stopping to rest and recuperate.

Feline Asthma Can Also Cause Panting

Feline asthma, also called bronchial asthma, allergic bronchitis and chronic bronchitis, affects cats of all ages worldwide. Asthma is a condition in which there is recurring constriction of the airways to the lungs.

Excessive amounts of mucus form in the airways, which causes them to become inflamed and sometimes ulcerated. This situation leads to spasms of the muscles of the airways, which is what causes the constriction or narrowing. Kitties with asthma can't draw a deep breath.

Symptoms to watch for include a dry hack, which often sounds like gagging or retching. In fact, it's not unheard of for an asthmatic cat to be diagnosed with hairballs. Wheezing, which can sound like a high-pitched sigh or a whistle, is another classic symptom. Labored breathing and exercise intolerance are also signs.

Even if your cat has a dry cough as her only symptom, it's not necessarily a measure of the severity of her asthma. Kitties can have really serious asthma but very few symptoms. Some cats have no symptoms at all, except they suddenly are unable to breathe. An acute asthma attack such as this can occur any time and obviously can be life-threatening for your cat.

Cats with serious asthma can also suffer obvious symptoms like panting or open-mouthed breathing. Brachycephalic cats with pushed in faces, such as Persians and Himalayans, are especially susceptible to breathing problems, including asthma. Sudden airway constriction can occur for no apparent reason. It can also result from an allergic reaction to inhaled triggers like grasses, pollens, ragweed, aerosol sprays, smoke, mildew, molds, dust mites, household chemicals — even kitty litter dust.

How to Tell if Your Cat's Panting Is Cause for Concern

To determine if there's a problem, it's important to pay attention to how often your kitty pants. Obviously, panting that is continuous or recurs is cause for concern. Persistent panting, especially in a cat with other behavior changes such as lack of appetite or lethargy, means it's time to call your veterinarian for an appointment.

Sources and References

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