

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

Discover what lies beneath the rare sight of a panting cat, from playful exertions to hidden health concerns.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Unlike dogs, cats rarely pant; however, it's a myth that panting in cats always indicates a significant concern
- If a cat's panting is over quickly and occurs after strenuous exercise or play, after he's been outdoors in warm weather, or during stressful events such as car rides or vet visits, there's no cause for immediate panic
- Beyond occasional, fleeting episodes with an obvious cause, panting in cats should be investigated further
- If your cat is panting continuously or consistently, it's time to make an appointment with your veterinarian; try to use your cell phone to grab a video of the behavior to show to your vet

Unlike dogs, our feline friends rarely pant, but according to veterinarian Dr. Elizabeth Rozanski of Tufts University's Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, it's simply a myth that panting in cats always indicates a significant concern, even though their preference is to breathe through their noses.<sup>1</sup>

The normal respiratory rate of cats in their homes is  $\leq 30$  breaths per minute.<sup>2</sup> During veterinary visits, it's commonly higher at a median of 64 breaths per minute).<sup>3</sup> Tachypnea is defined as a respiratory rate higher than normal, and panting is a form of tachypnea.

Panting is defined as an increased respiratory rate with short and shallow breaths and may be normal or part of respiratory distress. When felines pant, it doesn't necessarily mean they're overheating, and in fact, panting is normal for cats in hot or stressful environments or during and after vigorous play, especially in kittens.

### Potentially Serious Underlying Causes

With that said, outside of transient episodes with an obvious cause, panting in cats should be investigated for 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 cats** — 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 has an inheritable component in some breeds of 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 and is rooted in lifestyle (dietary) factors, including chronic protein (amino acid) deficiency from consuming carbohydrate-based cat foods.

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 or progressed 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 regularly 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 (and breathe through their mouths).

- **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, open-mouthed 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 the inability to adequately breathe through their noses and 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 as soon as possible.

It can be helpful for your vet to see a video of your cat panting. It's also a good idea to routinely monitor your kitty's resting respiratory rate, even if he or she is apparently healthy since an elevated respiratory rate (>30 breaths per minute) while sleeping has been associated with heart disease.<sup>4</sup>

### Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Clinician's Brief, September 2023](#)

<sup>2,4</sup> [Ljungvall I. et al. J Feline Med Surg. 2014;16\(4\):281-290](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Dijkstra E. et al. Vet J. 2018;234:96-101](#)

---