

# Hungry, Skinny, and Still a Mystery?

If you notice these symptoms in your cat, they may be pointing to a condition affecting this organ. And when it falters, your pet's body suffers in ways that may at first seem mysterious. Here is how to bring your cat's health back on track.

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A ravenous appetite paired with steady weight loss may signal endocrine disease. Once hyperthyroidism has been ruled out, consider exocrine pancreatic insufficiency (EPI), a hidden disorder where your cat's pancreas no longer produces enough digestive enzymes
- The pancreas performs two critical jobs — producing insulin and glucagon to regulate blood sugar and releasing enzymes to digest food. When enzyme production fails, nutrition is lost, and malnutrition quickly develops
- EPI develops gradually, often linked to chronic pancreatitis. Symptoms may include greasy stools, a dull coat, weakness, lethargy, and secondary issues like vitamin B12 deficiency or intestinal bacterial overgrowth
- Diagnosing EPI requires specialized veterinary testing, including the trypsin-like immunoreactivity (TLI) blood test and vitamin level assessments, which together confirm whether the pancreas is failing to support digestion
- While incurable, EPI can be successfully managed. With enzyme replacement, vitamin support, dietary adjustments, and ongoing veterinary care, most cats regain weight, energy, and enjoy a renewed quality of life

You may have noticed troubling changes in your once-vibrant cat. Despite eating with great enthusiasm, perhaps even ravenously, your cat continues to lose weight. Their fur may appear lackluster, their stools messy, and no matter how diligently you provide food, the pounds seem to slip away as if into thin air. This scenario is distressing for any devoted pet parent and often leaves people confused, anxious, and searching for answers.

Such a puzzling picture sometimes points to a little-known but important condition called exocrine pancreatic insufficiency (EPI). Although not widely recognized outside veterinary medicine, EPI is a disorder that can seriously undermine your cat's well-being if not identified and treated appropriately.

## The Pancreas — An Unsung Hero in Your Cat's Body

The pancreas is not an organ most cat parents think about daily, yet it quietly performs tasks essential to survival. Situated under the stomach and adjacent to the first portion of the small intestine (the duodenum), the pancreas is central to two vital body functions:<sup>1</sup>

- **Endocrine role** — It produces insulin, the hormone responsible for moving sugar from the bloodstream into cells, providing the body with usable energy. When insulin-producing cells are damaged, diabetes mellitus

develops. The pancreas also produces glucagon, which helps to raise blood sugar levels when too low.

- **Exocrine role** — It secretes digestive enzymes — lipase to break down fat, proteases to break down protein, amylase to digest starch, and bicarbonate to neutralize stomach acid. These enzymes are delivered into the small intestine, where they help to transform food into absorbable nutrients.

When the exocrine portion of the pancreas loses its ability to produce and release enzymes, digestion is disrupted at the most basic level. Food passes through the small intestine undigested, and nutrients fail to be absorbed into the bloodstream. This is the defining characteristic of exocrine pancreatic insufficiency.

## Exocrine Pancreatic Insufficiency (EPI) Explained

EPI occurs when the pancreas no longer generates enough digestive enzymes to sustain normal digestion. While food may be eaten eagerly, the body cannot access the nourishment it contains. The result is a cat who appears perpetually hungry yet steadily loses weight.

This mismatch between intake and nutrition explains why EPI can be so confounding. Owners may reasonably assume that a cat eating heartily should maintain or even gain weight. In the case of EPI, however, meals pass through the system partially digested. The body remains in a state of starvation despite having an abundance of food.<sup>2,3</sup>

## Subtle Signs and Their Gradual Onset

Unlike sudden illnesses, which announce themselves with dramatic signs, EPI often develops slowly. Its symptoms emerge in increments, sometimes mistaken for normal aging or ordinary digestive upset. Yet taken together, they form a recognizable pattern. Some common signs of EPI include:<sup>4,5</sup>

- **Weight loss** — This is observed in over 90% of cases.
- **Frequent, loose, or greasy stools** — Evidence that fats are not being digested.
- **A dull, unkempt coat** — Their fur often appears oily or stained, particularly around the tail.
- **A ravenous appetite** — Many cats eat more than usual, though some lose interest in food altogether.
- **Lethargy and weakness** — These signs stem from malabsorption and malnutrition.
- **Intermittent vomiting or diarrhea** — These complicate their digestion further and are often signs of concurrent disease.

Complicating matters, more than half of cats with EPI simultaneously suffer from other illnesses, such as diabetes, cholangitis (inflammation of the bile ducts), or inflammatory bowel disease. These overlapping conditions blur the diagnostic picture.

## Why Does EPI Develop?

The leading cause of EPI in cats is chronic pancreatitis, a long-term inflammation of the pancreas. Pancreatitis literally means "inflammation of the pancreas." This slow, ongoing irritation gradually destroys the delicate enzyme-producing cells, leaving the organ unable to perform its digestive function.<sup>6,7</sup>

In its acute form, pancreatitis is a sudden, sometimes life-threatening event. In its chronic form, it smolders. Repeated or ongoing inflammation injures the pancreas little by little, with each episode causing more lasting harm.

Symptoms of chronic pancreatitis can be vague and episodic — loss of appetite, abdominal pain, vomiting, lethargy, and gradual weight loss. Because the pancreas is closely linked to both the liver and the intestines, its inflammation often spills over into these organs, complicating the picture. Concurrent inflammation of pancreas, liver/gallbladder, and small intestine in cats is known as feline triaditis.

With time, chronic inflammation destroys enough enzyme-producing tissue that the pancreas can no longer meet the body's digestive needs. At this stage, chronic pancreatitis effectively transforms into exocrine pancreatic insufficiency.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from chronic pancreatitis, there are other, less frequent causes of EPI. These include:<sup>9,10</sup>

- **Congenital defects** (developmental abnormalities present from birth)
- **Pancreatic cancer**
- **Obstruction of the pancreatic duct**, which carries enzymes into the small intestine
- **Parasitic infections**, such as pancreatic flukes acquired from eating grasshoppers (a rare but documented cause)

Unlike EPI in canines, genetics does not appear to predispose cats to EPI. No breed is more at risk, and the disorder may affect cats of any age or background.

## Diagnosing EPI

EPI can masquerade as many other diseases, so reaching the correct diagnosis requires careful veterinary investigation. Your veterinarian may conduct these tests to confirm a diagnosis:<sup>11,12</sup>

- **General health screening** — Initial blood chemistry and complete blood counts provide a broad overview of your cat's health. They may reveal anemia, inflammation, or concurrent diseases, guiding the veterinarian toward a comprehensive treatment plan.
- **Trypsin-like immunoreactivity (TLI) test** — This is the definitive diagnostic tool. This blood test measures levels of trypsin, a digestive enzyme normally present at low concentrations. In EPI, these levels drop significantly. To ensure accuracy, cats need to fast for eight to 12 hours before testing.
- **Vitamin assessments** — Because cats with EPI frequently experience vitamin B12 (cobalamin) deficiency and sometimes low folate, measuring these levels is essential. Deficiencies need to be corrected to restore vitality and prevent further complications.

## Treatment to Restore Digestive Function

While EPI cannot be cured, it can be effectively managed. With proper therapy, many cats regain weight, energy, and quality of life.

- **Pancreatic enzyme replacement** — The cornerstone of treatment is enzyme supplementation. Powdered enzyme products, mixed thoroughly into food, are most effective. These powders pre-digest food before your

cat consumes it, easing the burden on the pancreas.

Some owners choose to feed raw pancreas meat as a natural enzyme source. While viable, this method carries risks of bacterial contamination for both cats and humans. Veterinary guidance is essential before pursuing this option.

- **Vitamin B12 (cobalamin)** — Most cats with EPI require regular cobalamin injections initially, often weekly or biweekly. As stability improves, injections may be spaced out, or oral supplements may be considered. Adequate B12 is vital for energy, cellular repair, and healthy digestion.
- **Folate supplementation** — If folate levels are low, supplementation may be prescribed temporarily. Regular monitoring ensures adequacy without unnecessary excess.
- **Antibiotics** — Some cats develop small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO), which worsens digestive upset. In such cases, antibiotics like tylosin can help rebalance the gut, often used for a course of several weeks to months.

## Food as Therapy and Other Supportive Strategies

Diet is a cornerstone of long-term management. While there is no single "EPI diet," certain principles guide success:<sup>13</sup>

- **High-quality, easily digestible, species-appropriate foods** reduce digestive strain.
- **Hypoallergenic or limited ingredient diets** may benefit cats with concurrent inflammatory bowel disease.
- **Moderate fat restriction** can lessen flare-ups in cats with active pancreatitis.
- **Avoidance of fillers and allergens** (corn, wheat, soy, and legumes) helps prevent inflammation.

In addition to conventional therapy, many pet parents find value in supportive measures:<sup>14</sup>

- **Probiotics** — These encourage healthy intestinal bacteria, which often decline in cats with EPI and contribute to maldigestion and low B12 and folate levels.
- **Liver and gallbladder support** — Because these organs work closely with the pancreas, supporting them can enhance overall digestive health.
- **Stress reduction** — Cats with digestive disease benefit from calm mealtimes, predictable feeding schedules, and minimal household stressors.

The outlook for cats with EPI is far more hopeful today than in the past. With dedicated management, most cats improve significantly. Owners often report noticeable weight gain, restored energy, a shinier coat, and more normal stools within weeks of starting enzyme therapy.

That said, EPI requires lifelong treatment and monitoring. Adjustments in enzyme dosage, diet, or supplements may be needed along the way. Regular veterinary visits ensure that deficiencies or complications are caught early.

# From Mysterious to Manageable

Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency begins as a perplexing riddle — a hungry, thin cat whose needs seem unmet despite endless meals. But with awareness, diagnostic diligence, and modern treatments, this once-hidden condition can be transformed into a manageable part of life.

As a devoted caregiver, you hold the key. By working closely with your veterinarian, adhering to enzyme therapy, supporting nutrition, and creating a stable, low-stress home, you give your cat the chance not merely to survive but to flourish.

Though the journey requires patience and persistence, the reward is profound: the restoration of health, comfort, and the joy of seeing your beloved feline thrive once more.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Pets Care, Understanding Cat Pancreas Anatomy: A Complete Guide for Pet Parents](#)

<sup>2,4,10,11</sup> [PetMD, October 19, 2021](#)

<sup>3,5,12</sup> [Animal Wellness Magazine, August 6, 2025](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine, Volume 35, Issue 2, March/April 2021, Pages 703-723](#)

<sup>7</sup> [J Feline Med Surg, 2020 Nov;22\(11\):1047-1067](#)

<sup>8,9,13,14</sup> [Grace Animal Rehab Center, Chronic Pancreatitis in Cats: There Is Hope!](#)

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