

My cat wasn't eating well so we took her to our vet. Based on blood work results our vet feels she has liver disease. She suggested some options for treatment. Is liver disease common in cats? What could have caused this?

Although kidney disease and hyperthyroidism are more common in cats, liver disease is something we do see. The liver is an organ with many jobs including the breakdown of fats, carbohydrates and proteins, storage of vitamins, minerals and fats, and maintaining cells that play a role in normal clot formation. The liver also helps detoxify drugs and other chemicals ingested. Although the liver is susceptible to injury, it is known for its ability to regenerate if there is damage.

Most cats with liver disease will display some combination of not eating, vomiting, diarrhea or fever. Jaundice (yellow tint to the gums, whites of eyes), fluid accumulation in the abdomen and weight loss are signs of serious disease. We need to understand what is causing the damage to the liver to be able to determine the appropriate treatment. Blood tests are our main tool for diagnosing liver disease. A blood chemistry panel may show liver enzymes that are generally elevated when the liver is diseased. Inflammation, infection, toxin or drug ingestion, bile duct obstruction and cancer are a few things that can cause elevations. Cats that don't eat for a prolonged period of time can develop a liver disease called hepatic lipidosis. There can also be changes in the complete blood count including anemia or low platelet numbers that are secondary to liver disease. In addition to these screening tests, specific liver function tests may also be needed.

After blood work is performed, radiographs (x-rays) are useful in determining abnormal liver size or shape and diseases of the gallbladder. Ultrasonography can further help to determine if the problem lies in the bile duct or blood vessels. Irregular densities noted on ultrasound might suggest a tumor. Using the ultrasound and a needle, we are often able to obtain a sample of cells from the liver to get a diagnosis.

Early treatment is important for the greatest success. If no cause can be identified, supportive care is usually started. This often times includes intravenous fluid therapy, antibiotics, and nutritional supplements to protect and support the liver. Diet changes will also help preserve liver function. Prognosis of liver disease depends on the underlying cause and your cat's response to therapy. We wish her the best.

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