

My 1 year old cat is active and playful, but she makes strange noises sometimes when she is breathing. She sounds like she is congested and sometimes sneezes. Our veterinarian has tried her on antibiotics for a possible infection and other medicine for a virus. She is still making the noises.

What else could it be?

It is possible that your cat has a benign growth in the back of her throat or middle ear. These are called nasopharyngeal polyps. They look like balls of shiny, pink tissue and grow over time to cause major discomfort. We aren't sure about what causes these growths, but it is likely they occur following an upper respiratory viral infection in a kitten. After the typical signs of the acute disease are gone, the virus settles in the middle ear or Eustachian tube and causes inflammation and swelling of the tissue there, resulting in the growth of the polyp. They are most common in young cats. The congested breathing and sneezing you are hearing are common symptoms, but based on the location of the growth; it could also grow through the ear drum into the ear canal and cause problems associated with ear infections such as balance issues, bad odor, and head shaking. If the polyp grows larger toward the nose and throat the airways will be narrowed causing trouble breathing, a loss of appetite and difficulty swallowing.

It may be hard for your veterinarian to visualize these polyps when your cat is awake. Sometimes they can be seen in the ear canal with the aid of an otoscope, others may be identified with skull x-rays. With sedation, an exam looking above the back of the soft palate may reveal the troublesome polyp.

Careful traction to remove the polyp with its connected stalk can be curative in some cats. There is a chance the polyp will regrow, but the use of prednisone (a steroid) after the procedure may help prevent this. Some difficult cases may require surgery through the ear canal to be removed. It is common for a cat to have signs of nerve damage, such as Horner's syndrome, after removal of a polyp due to injury of the nerves in that area, but this condition is usually temporary.

If this is the cause of your cat's breathing problems, you will see (and hear) immediate improvement after the surgery, which should be a relief for both of you.

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Polyps have to be removed surgically. Some polyps located at