

Feline Senility

Aging cats can start to vocalize excessively, get lost in their own homes, and fail to recognize their favorite people. Learn more about cognitive dysfunction syndrome.

By Kim Campbell Thornton

They prowl the house late at night, howling mournfully. They wander into a room and then just stand there, seemingly wondering why they came in and how to get back out. Instead of giving a happy *mrrrp* when they see favorite people, they look confused, as if they don't recognize them.

When cats age, we see a number of physiological changes. These include a decline in immune system function, hearing loss, decreased visual acuity, and a greater likelihood of degenerative joint disease and renal insufficiency, says Susan Little, DVM, of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, a board-certified feline practitioner and president of the Winn Feline Foundation, which funds research into cat-related health problems. Another sign of aging, she adds, is cognitive dysfunction syndrome.

SENILITY STRIKES SENIOR CATS

Cognitive dysfunction syndrome — or senility, as it's more commonly called — has not yet been documented in cats by researchers, but people who live with aged cats have no doubt that such a condition exists. The acronym DISH spells out the



This old cat appears confused and unsure of his surroundings, despite living in this house for many years. This is a possible indication of cognitive dysfunction syndrome.

University.

D is for disorientation. Cats who are disoriented often walk aimlessly, stare at walls, get "stuck" in corners, seem to be lost in their own home, or lose their balance and fall.

I is for interactions. Cats with CDS often display changes in their interactions with people. They're less

displeasure with the litter box, but, well, just because they forget.

Before CDS can be diagnosed, however, it's important to rule out certain medical conditions that can cause similar signs. These include hyperthyroidism, brain tumors, urinary tract infections, and liver or kidney disease, Dr. Moon-Fanelli says.

"We have to learn to change our interactions with older pets. When owners understand aging changes and work closely with vets, these senior years can be very rewarding."

signs that commonly accompany suspected CDS, which generally affects cats that are more than 12 years old, explains Alice Moon-Fanelli, PhD, Clinical Assistant Professor and certified-applied animal behaviorist at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts

likely to greet people when they come home or to seek out a lap.

S is for sleep. Cats who once slept through the night may prowl restlessly, vocalizing as they roam.

H is for house training. Proper bathroom habits often go by the wayside; not for medical reasons or

Disruption of sleep patterns, wandering around the house hollering, and not seeming to recognize familiar people are all good reasons to schedule your aging cat for a visit with the veterinarian, says Robin Downing, DVM, of Windsor Veterinary Clinic in Windsor,

Colorado. She also lives with and treats a number of senior cats. A common problem in older cats — hyperthyroidism, or an overactive thyroid gland — causes much the same signs and is easily treatable with I-131 radioactive iodine treatment or medication to suppress the overactive thyroid. With treatment, she says, the symptoms resolve and the cat returns to its normal self.

“The other symptom I have had cats present with that can cause similar manifestations is primary hypertension,” Dr. Downing says. “I had a cat with primary hypertension whose systolic pressure — that’s the top number for you and me — was around 300, and he blew the retinas off the backs of his eyes and was

blind. The reason he was wandering around the house and screaming at night was not because he was senile but because he couldn’t see.”

She continues, “Once we controlled his hypertension, his retinas were able to reattach at some level and at least part of his vision was restored, so he didn’t have an ongoing long-term issue.”

RULE OUT MEDICAL CAUSES FIRST

If these and other medical problems are ruled out, then a diagnosis of CDS should be considered. While veterinary researchers have not yet formally documented that CDS exists in cats, don’t assume that nothing can be done to help your cat. Structure, limitations and new routines can all

help. In some instances, supplements and medication may be effective.

For a cat who is showing signs of disorientation in his own home, some simple steps can help him stay safe and secure. Consider limiting your cat’s access to stairs or to certain parts of the house.

“These are cats who I would prohibit from having access to stairs, so they wouldn’t go into a basement and not be able to come out,” Dr. Downing says. “I might limit their access to some parts of the house, so they wouldn’t go into a closet and not be able to get themselves out.”

Structure and routine will help your aging cat maintain good mental function. If you can make it an interaction the cat will anticipate, so much the better. A feeding schedule is a good example, even if your cat is used to having food out all the time.

“Create an opportunity for the cat to have a new routine that includes interaction around a scoop of a different kind of dry food or a spoonful of a canned food that’s appropriate for the cat to eat,” Dr. Downing says.

Make getting the special food a big deal and schedule it at specific times of the day. Having something to look forward to is a great way to help keep your cat’s mind active.

MONITOR SLEEP-WAKE CYCLES

If your cat isn’t sleeping through the night — which means that you’re not sleeping through the night — try the simple act of waking him up when you see him sleeping during the day. Be gentle, though. Don’t take your lack of sleep out on the cat. Instead, carry him, hold him, talk to him, do what you can to keep him awake so there’s less potential for nighttime meow-filled wanderings.

You may also ask your veterinarian if giving an antihistamine, which can cause drowsiness, at night will help. Your veterinarian can recommend an appropriate product and amount. You can also try giving your cat a little turkey or lactose-free milk before bedtime. Both contain the



PHOTO BY WEEEMS HUTTO

Some senior cats vocalize loudly, especially at night. It may be due to hearing loss or decreased mental capacity — or both.

amino acid L-tryptophan, which is said to have sedative properties. As long as your veterinarian approves, it can't hurt to try.

CONSULT VET ABOUT MEDICATIONS

For the healthy-but-senile cat, ask your veterinarian about medication to ease the symptoms.

"Melatonin (a supplement) sometimes can reduce nighttime prowling and vocalizing in some cats," Dr. Moon-Fanelli says.

It would be one thing if cats with CDS simply roamed the house quietly throughout the night, but more often than not, their prowling is accompanied by ear-piercing yowling. If the suggestions above don't help, Dr. Downing says the following suggestion has been tried with mixed results.

Being sure to provide a bed and litter pan, close the cat in a small room. A bathroom is ideal as long as you close the lid to the toilet. Turn on an overhead fan or play a small radio: anything that will create background noise.

"It may create enough distraction to allow the cat to come out of that yowling cycle," Dr. Downing says. "If the cat is yowling because it's deaf, however, it's not going to make that much difference."

Deafness must also be considered. Sometimes, a cat's plaintive vocalizations are not caused by hyperthyroidism, hypertension, or CDS. He may instead have suffered hearing loss. Hearing (and vision) loss can cause cats to emit sounds of distress.

Cats who are deaf often "talk" loudly, with no idea that their voices have increased in pitch. Until a hearing aid for cats is developed, not much can be done to get your cat to keep his voice to a low roar. That's when earplugs or a cat room at the other end of the house come in handy.

Add more litter boxes throughout your home, especially if it has multiple stories. Beyond the issue of the forgetfulness that affects cats with



PHOTO BY SANDRA TONRY

As cats reach their senior years, it is vital to provide them with reassuring hugs and attention — to let them feel safe and secure.

CDS, many older cats have achy joints that make it difficult for them to negotiate stairs. Placing a litter box in every room — even if it's just a Rubbermaid® dish pan — gives your cat every opportunity to do the right thing as far as going to the bathroom is concerned.

Little or no research has been done on CDS in cats, so no medications are proven to help. In dogs, a medication called L-deprenyl (also known by the monikers, selegiline and Anipryl) is used to treat cognitive dysfunction syndrome. It is not approved for use in cats, although some veterinarians have prescribed it for cats with varying degrees of success.

"L-deprenyl is a medication that is used to treat cognitive dysfunction in cats and can prolong quality of life for six to 12 months in some cats," Dr. Moon-Fanelli says. Dr. Little also says that Anipryl can be used in some feline patients.

Nicholas Dodman, BVMS, a vet-

erinarian and director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Cummings, says of Anipryl: "I understand that selegiline (generic name) works as well for these cats as it does for dogs, but I have no personal experience of using it in cats. If it works as well as it does in dogs, it would definitely be worth trying."

He continues, "One-third of dogs respond extremely well, one-third respond usefully well, and one-third don't improve."

Another possible treatment — again, extrapolated from research in dogs — has shown that high levels of antioxidants appear to help dogs with cognitive dysfunction syndrome. Dr. Downing is fond of saying that cats are not small dogs, and notes that there's no science to support that the same would be true in cats. That said, she also says it wouldn't hurt to give it a try.

"A veterinarian may be willing to advise a cat owner about adding

antioxidants to the diet like omega-3 fatty acids at high levels — to see if there would be a difference,” she says, “but that would need to be a decision between the veterinarian and the cat owner.”

Like any condition of old age, CDS can eventually affect a cat’s quality of life as well as his relationship with his family. It’s important to recognize that a cat’s needs have changed and respond accordingly.

“We have learned to change our interactions with older pets,” says Dr. Little. “Many people find this period of a pet’s life strengthens the human-animal bond as the pet needs more help and becomes more dependent. When owners understand aging changes and work closely with their veterinarians to meet their cats’ health care needs, then these senior years can be very rewarding.” 🐾



PHOTO BY WEEMS HULTO

This cat strikes a where-am-I pose. Disorientation is one of the symptoms associated with cognitive dysfunction syndrome.

KNOWING WHEN TO SAY GOODBYE

One of the kindest things we can do for our cats is to release them from a life that contains more suffering than pleasure. But knowing when that time has come can be difficult. Answering the following questions can help you determine your cat’s quality of life:

Does my cat still enjoy eating? Eating is an essential and pleasurable part of life. If your cat is not interested in eating, doesn’t seem to recognize food, or simply forgets to eat, you may be looking at the end of his life.

Does my cat still recognize and enjoy interacting with family members? Cats who no longer enjoy being petted, touched or talked to may not have the physical or cognitive ability to enjoy life anymore.

Does my cat still use the litter box more often than not? When cats have complete loss of litter box usage — and bladder infections, bladder tumors, and kidney disease have been ruled out — both you and your cat can become distressed by the situation.

Does my cat have behavioral changes that make him unsafe to live with? Some old cats develop dramatic alterations in behavior, such as uncontrollable aggression.

Is my cat’s personality so dull and blunted that he’s incapable of any interactions or of behaving like a cat? If you can answer yes to more than one of these questions, talk to your veterinarian.

“Most vets are very good at helping owners understand when quality of life is degraded to the point that it is time to say goodbye,” says Susan Little, DVM, of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, a board-certified feline practitioner and president of the Winn Feline Foundation. This group funds research into cat-related health problems.

She adds, “When pets have more bad days than good, when they cease interacting with owners, or when medical problems can’t be controlled or are too burdensome, then it’s time to say goodbye.”

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