

# Ask A Vet: This Cat Hates Pills

*Sunday, September 13, 2015*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My cat was recently diagnosed with hyperthyroidism. What does this mean? He hates pills, what other treatment options are out there?

Dear Reader,

What a great question! Let's start out with the basics of hyperthyroidism. The thyroid gland produces thyroid hormones (T4, T3, etc) which are responsible for metabolic processes throughout the body. Thyroid tumors (called "adenomas") are the most common cause of hyperthyroidism in cats. An increase in the secretion of these hormones from your cat's thyroid gland can lead to signs such as weight loss, increased appetite, hyperexcitability, increased thirst, a palpable thyroid nodule, increased urination, vomiting, diarrhea, increased heart rate, heart murmurs, difficulty breathing, enlarged heart and even heart failure. Hyperthyroid cats can rarely show the opposite signs and have anorexia, depression and lethargy along with the weight loss. To diagnose your cat with hyperthyroidism, your veterinarian will do a thorough physical exam and likely become suspicious of the disease based on the physical exam. To confirm the diagnosis, blood work will be done to test your cat's thyroid hormone levels. High levels of the T4 thyroid hormone in the cat's blood are the hallmark of hyperthyroidism and confirm the diagnosis.

I'm sorry to hear your kitty does not like his medications, but do not fear – there are several other options out there! Four options exist for treatment of hyperthyroidism – radioactive iodine therapy, thyroid gland removal, chronic antithyroid drug treatment or lifelong nutritional therapy with an iodine deficient diet. Thyroid hormones are the only hormones in the body that are "iodinated" or have iodine attached to them. This allows us to target our treatments to the thyroid gland by using radioactive iodine. The radioactive iodine concentrates in the thyroid tumor and irradiates and destroys the overly functional thyroid tissue. This treatment is safe, simple and effective. Another option is surgical removal of the gland. This often requires thyroid hormone supplementation and hypocalcemia can occur if the parathyroid glands are damaged. A third option is treatment with an antithyroid drug, called methimazole, which is likely what your cat was prescribed. Methimazole is effective for cats that will take oral medications. It requires frequent monitoring of thyroid hormone levels to reach an ideal dose and maintain proper circulating hormone levels. The final treatment option is feeding a prescription diet that is purposefully low in iodine levels. An iodine deficient diet does not allow for excessive production of T4 and T3. This therapy is ideal for cats in which surgery or radioactive iodine therapy is not an option, those that will not take oral medications, or those that have developed adverse effects to methimazole. Diet therapy seems to be more effective in cats with more mild increases in T4 levels.

Radioactive iodine is the treatment of choice for hyperthyroidism in cats. It is safe, effective and daily medications are not necessitated. However, cost and availability may be limiting factors, and other options do exist. You should discuss with your veterinarian which course of treatment will be right for you and your cat. If you have any questions, or you think your cat may be hyperthyroid, please contact your local veterinarian.

-Dr. Ashley Vander Wey