

# Liver Disease in Cats

A Brief Guide • Part of the Educational Pet Disease Series from Lap of Love

## Signs & Symptoms

### Initial Symptoms

- Regurgitation
- Weight loss
- Anorexia
- Nausea
- Lethargy
- Vomiting

### Intermediate Symptoms

- Reclusive behavior
- Decreased appetite
- Light colored stool
- Diarrhea
- Fever
- Black tarry stool

### Advanced Symptoms

- Discolored urine
- Yellow tinged skin, eyes, ears
- Large pendulous belly
- Bruising easily
- Vision changes
- Increased drinking/peeing

### Crisis Situations Requiring Immediate Medical Intervention

- Excessive bleeding that won't stop
- Difficulty breathing
- Unable to walk
- Blue gums and/or tongue
- Sudden collapse
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Yowling in pain
- Seizures

## What Is It?

The liver is an important organ with critical responsibilities within the body including digestion of protein, removal of toxins from the blood stream, bile metabolism, production of clotting factors, and the storage of minerals and vitamins. Due to the many vital roles of the liver, once dysfunctional, liver disease can have fast and serious consequences for the whole body. Inflammation of the liver, hepatitis, may develop, which without treatment can lead to a loss of functional liver tissue replaced by scar tissue. Fortunately, as the liver typically can heal from insult, many liver diseases can be managed. The most common feline liver diseases tend to be immune-mediated, neoplastic (cancer), hepatic lipidosis (liver disease due to prolonged anorexia), and bacterial infections. Toxins, drug-induced dysfunction, and diseases present from birth (common in Siamese cats) are not as prevalent but have been reported. Hepatic lipidosis results from overwhelming fat processing in the face of prolonged anorexia, therefore obesity is considered a significant pre-disposing factor. Hepatic lipidosis may be triggered by any other disease that causes anorexia, such as severe dental disease.

## Diagnosis

Due to the large number of possible causes of liver disease, many of which have similar symptoms, diagnosis of any singular definitive cause is often difficult. However, most cats will visit their veterinarian due to lack of appetite, weight loss, vomiting, diarrhea, and general lethargy. After the initial exam, diagnostic testing may include bloodwork, urinalysis, fecal testing, chest and abdominal x-rays, and infectious disease testing. Further diagnostics after the initial presentation may involve liver specific panels, ultrasound of the abdomen, evaluation of fluid in the abdomen if present, and exploratory surgery with biopsies. Involving an internal medicine specialist is often helpful as the more specific knowledge of the nuances of the many types of liver diseases can help direct the best diagnostics for each cat.

## Treatment and Management

The underlying cause of the liver disease will dictate the type of treatment the pet may receive. Mild forms of disease can be treated medically with pharmaceuticals designed to reverse the damage to the liver. In more severe cases of cirrhosis or cancer, surgery may help. Cats with hepatic lipidosis benefit from aggressively addressing the anorexia. Aggressive hospitalization early on in disease presentation to support the cat symptomatically can greatly increase the chances of successful recovery. Because liver disease affects so many parts of the body, medical management of all symptoms is important. Symptoms and secondary diseases are managed with pain medications, steroids, anti-nausea medications, liver support agents, antibiotics, vitamins, feeding support, appetite stimulants, and fluids among others.

## Prognosis

Broadly, the prognosis for any feline liver disease depends on the specific cause. The prognosis is better with early disease recognition as the liver is



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generally resilient and regenerative. The presence of jaundice and fluid in the abdomen are both poor prognostic signs of end stage disease. Other diseases, such as hepatic lipidosis, if managed aggressively can resolve. Management of concurrent diseases is critical to ensure the best prognosis possible. A personalized treatment plan is important to slow the progression of the liver disease. Talk to your veterinarian regarding the best protocol for your cat.

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## *Management Tips*

### *Consider providing:*

- Easily accessible food and water
- Access to "safe" quiet areas
- Warm, soft sleeping areas
- Natural calming products
- Canned food over kibble
- Prescription liver diets
- Compounded meds in easier to give and tasty forms if needed

### *Try to:*

- Be consistent with medication
- Provide proactive pain management
- Track appetite, weight, vomiting, diarrhea, energy level, etc.
- Track the good days vs. the bad days
- Limit stress (kids, noise)
- Use gentle handling at all times
- Stay consistent with preventative care
- Keep cat indoors
- Provide multiple litter boxes and clean them often
- Maintain proper grooming
- Use in home pet sitters if traveling
- Check the eyes/skin/ears for jaundice (yellow tinged color)
- Address new concerns ASAP
- Have a small supply of emergency meds such as anti-nausea at home

Before your pet's condition becomes unmanageable or they are losing quality of life, it is important to begin end-of-life care discussions. Learn about pet hospice care and/or euthanasia services in your area so you are prepared.