Cases From Our Clinic: The Kitten Who Ran Out of Energy

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

...An otherwise healthy kitten suddenly acts very lethargic.

One cold morning we were in the middle of an exam when a concerned client called. She had taken in a 6-week-old orphaned kitten two days ago. Snuggles, who had been rambunctious earlier in the morning, had all of a sudden slowed down and was looking weak, barely moving. We told her to bring Snuggles in right away and got the crash cart out just in case.

When the kitten was brought in, he was lethargic as described. We quickly drew a small amount of blood to test for blood glucose (sugar) as we took his temperature, pulse, and respiration. We saw that his blood glucose was all the way down to 30 – a kitten's normal blood glucose level should be anywhere from 80-110. A lower than normal blood sugar level is called "hypoglycemia" (see our sidebar below). We quickly administered some dextrose fluid intravenously while we sat down and talked to the owners to get a brief history.

It seems the owners had acquired Snuggles two days ago. The kitten was in a house with two other cats – one six-year-old male and a younger female about one year old. We asked what happened right before the kitten became weak. It seems that Snuggles had been playing non-stop with his housemates for at least an hour – running around, leaping on and off furniture, trying to climb the living room curtains, and other kitten-like busy behavior.

We asked about the food situation – whether food was left out all the time (called "free choice feeding") or if the cats had set eating times. We also asked if the kitten was being fed alone in an out-of-the-way spot, so the other cats could not get to his kitten food. It turned out that the owners had been feeding all their cats together, assuming the kitten was getting his share of the food since they had seen him eat.

By the time we completed the brief history, Snuggles had transformed completely. We gave him a high protein meal after the dextrose injection and he was now up and about being as curious as a kitten should.

We suggested to the owners they feed Snuggles a high quality kitten food in an area where the other cats could not get to his food. He should receive a meal every few hours, and they should monitor him to make sure he ate his full ration every day. We also asked them to weigh Snuggles daily to make sure he was gaining weight. We kept him overnight for observation and made sure that his blood glucose was back to normal before sending him home. The owners raised the question of possible diabetes, although we reassured them that a bout of hypoglycemia does not predispose a cat to diabetes.

About Hypoglycemia

A kitten's normal blood glucose level should be anywhere from 80-110.

- Most instances of hypoglycemia in kittens are the result of inadequate nutrition; either not enough or poor quality (undigestible) food. Excessive exercise, cold environmental temperatures, and infections may also cause the body to use up more sugar than is available.

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We took a fecal sample from Snuggles to check for parasites, since a large number of intestinal worms can predispose a young animal to develop hypoglycemia. Other contributing factors include infections and low body temperature. Young animals have difficulty maintaining their body temperature in cooler environments.

This was 10 years ago. Snuggles is now a healthy cat who still has the energy of a kitten. We have seen him on and off for physical exams and rabies vaccinations, but he has proved to be one of the healthiest cats that we have seen in our clinic.

• A kitten with hypoglycemia will lack energy. In severe instances, the kitten may even have a seizure, since glucose is necessary for the brain tissue and muscles to function. These hypoglycemic episodes will cause the kitten to fall over and appear lethargic or comatose.

• If you suspect your kitten is having an episode, it is imperative to immediately provide a source of sugar. Karo® syrup is an excellent, readily available choice. If the kitten fails to respond, or the hypoglycemic episodes are frequent, then a thorough exam by a veterinarian is in order.

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