Stories From Our Clinic: The Black Cat's Kidneys

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

We got a call a couple of years ago from a long time client, Chelsea. She reported a gradual onset of an array of symptoms plaguing her 12-year-old black cat, Sassy. They included vomiting, increased drinking, a lack of appetite, and excessive urination. Based on the problems reported, we got an appointment for her immediately.

Clearly the cat appeared ill. Her symptoms could be related to a number of diseases and disorders, so it was important to run a few tests in addition to the regular physical examination. We took blood from Sassy and ran a chemistry panel (which tests for specific levels of components normally in the blood). We also ran a test on Sassy's urine called a urinalysis.

The blood tests demonstrated an increased blood urea nitrogen level (BUN) and a high level of creatinine. The urinalysis showed a low reading of the specific gravity, a measurement of the concentration of particles in the urine. The high BUN and creatinine and the low specific gravity, along with history and symptoms, showed that Sassy's kidneys were not working correctly. This confirmed our suspicions - Sassy had chronic renal (kidney) failure (CRF).

Chronic renal disease is fairly common in senior cats. CRF occurs when the cat has a long period - from months to years - of the kidneys not working correctly. When kidneys are not working as they should, toxins that the kidneys would normally filter out build up in the blood, making the cat sick. Treatment is always long term and generally includes a change in diet, allowing access to plenty of fresh water, drugs called ACE inhibitors, medications to prevent stomach ulcers and treat high blood pressure, if present, and fluid therapy. Medications to treat electrolyte imbalances are often needed.

We started the fluid therapy treatment immediately and we knew Sassy would need ongoing Sub-Q fluids as well as a change in diet. Renal diets generally have lower levels of protein, but the protein is very high quality so there are less breakdown products the kidneys need to eliminate. Chelsea was willing to learn how to perform fluid therapy at home and administer the other medications. She also brings Sassy to the clinic for regular monitoring of her blood.

Fortunately, Chelsea did not ignore her cat's symptoms, and supportive therapy helps Sassy maintain a better quality of life.

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