

BASIC INFORMATION

Description

The colon or large intestine contains the remains of digested material and dehydrates it to form feces. The colon ends at the rectum and anus. If the passage of feces is altered or delayed and feces remain in the colon for prolonged periods, the colon continues to extract water from the feces. As a result, the feces becomes very dry and hard, which makes it harder for them to move. Subsequently, more and more feces accumulate, which stretches the colon and greatly increases its size. A chronically enlarged colon that is often filled with dried feces is called a *megacolon*.

Causes

Of the two main causes of megacolon in cats, the more common one is unrelieved or recurrent constipation. Constipation may arise from narrowing of the pelvis due to an old fracture, paralysis of the anal region from neurologic damage or disease, chronic intestinal diseases, or other diseases that cause persistent dehydration (such as kidney disease). If constipation is not relieved, the distended colon loses normal muscle strength, which further aggravates the constipation.

A second form of megacolon develops from loss of normal nerve function within the wall of the colon. The nerve problem decreases muscle strength, which leads to constipation. Constipation is an effect, not a cause. The cause of the nerve dysfunction is not often identified. Regardless of the underlying cause, the end result is a colon that is dramatically larger than normal.

Clinical Signs

The most common sign is severe constipation. Cats may strain for long periods in the litter box, passing only small amounts of feces. Some cats vomit and lose their appetite. Occasionally, a liquid part of the feces is passed (paradoxical diarrhea), while solids are left behind. On clinical examination, an enlarged colon often can be felt within the abdomen. The cat may have signs of dehydration (tacky mucous membranes, stiff skin that tents up when pulled).

Diagnostic Tests

X-rays of the abdomen and spine are often recommended to look for problems in the skeleton (such as old pelvic fractures), to assess the degree of constipation, and to search for other problems that may be contributing to constipation. Routine laboratory tests and an abdominal ultrasound are sometimes recommended to look for contributing diseases and evidence of dehydration.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

In most cases, it is important to correct any dehydration with subcutaneous (under the skin) or intravenous fluids prior to treating the constipation. This is particularly important if the cat has kidney disease. Treatment of the constipation and megacolon involves several options. The approach taken depends on the cause of the disease. Treatment options include the following:

- Relief of severe constipation often requires general anesthesia and administration of multiple enemas to soften the fecal material, combined with manual kneading and extraction of the stool. Multiple rounds of anesthesia and administration of enemas over several days may be needed to relieve the constipation.
- In cats with less severe constipation (particularly if they can still pass some feces), warm-water enemas, drugs (such as cisapride, nizatidine, ranitidine) to increase muscular contraction of the colon, laxatives (such as lactulose, docusate sodium), and dietary changes (increased fiber) may be tried.
- If constipation arises from a mechanical problem, such as an old pelvic fracture that is impeding passage of feces, surgery may be needed to enlarge the pelvic canal.
- For colons that have lost all muscle strength and ability to move feces, partial removal of the colon (subtotal colectomy) may be considered. Your veterinarian may refer your cat to a veterinary surgery specialist for this procedure.

Follow-up Care

Cats that are treated with medications and laxatives are usually monitored closely with follow-up visits until the constipation has resolved. Long-term preventive medical therapy and periodic rechecks are often advisable, because constipation can recur. After subtotal colectomy, the initial postoperative period can be challenging, because bowel movements may be soft for a period of time. Eventually their consistency often returns to normal. Medical therapy is not often needed after surgery, but periodic rechecks may be recommended.

Prognosis

Prognosis for cats with megacolon that are treated medically is usually guarded (uncertain). If muscle function returns and constipation resolves with therapy, the prognosis is reasonable; however, recurrence is common in many cats. Cats can suffer severe, life-threatening illness as a result of long-term constipation. The prognosis for recovery from surgery is good if no complications occur.