Hi, this is Dr. Karen Becker and today we’re going to discuss “Feline Hyperthyroidism.” Hyperthyroidism is the most diagnosed endocrine disorder in cats. And in cats, the thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland that sits at the base of your cat’s throat. When the thyroid gland overproduces thyroid hormone, the condition is called Hyperthyroidism. It’s incredibly common in kitties over the age of 8.

**Symptoms of Hyperthyroidism in Cats**

Fifty percent of cats that acquire hyperthyroidism end up wanting to eat a whole lot more. Ninety percent of kitties that acquire hyperthyroidism end up having weight loss because their metabolism is up regulated from the amount of circulating thyroid hormone that’s in your bloodstream.

Most of the tumors on the thyroid glands of cats are benign. They’re called adenomas. But rarely, thyroid carcinoma, which is true cancer, can occur. The good news is most of the tumors that cause feline hyperthyroidism are benign. There are some other symptoms that can come about besides weight loss and increased appetite. Cats can sometimes have high blood pressure as well as vomiting. Their heart rate, temperature, respiration rate can increase because their metabolism has been increased. Those can be notable symptoms as is hyperactivity. A lot of people will call my practice and say, “I have a 13-, 14- or 15-year-old cat that has suddenly become very active. In fact, it has become surprisingly active.” These cats are jumping around, they’re moving and they’re keeping me up all night. They’re really active and sometimes that symptom, in conjunction with weight loss or increased appetite, can signal that your cat is developing hyperthyroidism. The great news is it can be diagnosed with a simple blood test through your veterinarian.

**Traditional Treatments for Hyperthyroidism Management**

There are 3 traditional treatments that are usually offered to manage hyperthyroidism. The first option is medical management. Medical management revolves around administering a pill. The pill is called “Methimazole,” the trade name is “Tapazole” for cats. Providing methimazole in oral form to cats twice a day inhibits thyroid hormone from being produced so the circulating amount of thyroid hormone is diminished in your cat’s body. And what research shows, most cats, in fact 87% of cats on Methimazole will have normalized thyroid levels within a couple of weeks of being
on this medication. Interestingly, 87% normalized with twice a day dosing and only 54% of cats have shown to normalize with once a day dosing. So we do recommend that you give Methimazole twice a day if you’re picking this form of therapy.

Side effects of Methimazole therapy can include gastrointestinal problems so cats can have GI upset that can cause them to throw up. We can also see actually, although this rarely happens, a really intense allergic response to using Methimazole in terms of treatment. Cats after one pill can develop a very intense facial itch that can cause the need for the owner to discontinue therapy. I have found with kitties that have gastrointestinal side effects that sometimes using compounded transdermal ointment that can be rubbed on the inside of your cat’s ear. Oftentimes, you can avoid the gastrointestinal side effects if indeed your cat has that rare symptom pertaining to using that medication. Other rare side effects include decreased platelets and increased liver enzymes by using that particular medication.

More aggressive traditional thyroid therapy revolves around either surgical thyroidectomy, which is surgically removing the benign tumor from your cat’s thyroid gland. This surgery should only be performed with a surgeon who is very skilled and has performed many of these procedures because even though this particular form of therapy is curative, which I like, there are some complications, some surgical complications that can arise if the surgery is not done excellently and 100%, which means the parathyroid glands, which sit on the thyroid glands. If the parathyroid glands are accidentally removed it can cause a whole host of really negative complications. So, I like surgical removal as my first treatment option for animals because although using Methimazole therapy can be beneficial, if your cat has a negative side effect from that, you end up having a different option and certainly, the surgical option is great because it’s cured, your cat’s done and can move along being thyroid problem-free, which is wonderful. If you opt to use the medical management, the Methimazole form of therapy, you have to have your cat on that pill for the rest of your cat’s life and you have to do really consistent blood monitoring to make sure your cat’s levels remain stable.

One complication that can arise after medical management has been successful with the pill form of Methimazole therapy is that once the blood pressure has been normalized in your cat’s body, the kidneys oftentimes end up struggling and you can end up with secondary kidney issues. Hyperthyroidism is well known to mask underlying kidney problems in cats. While the cat is having high blood pressure and a lot of blood flow to the kidneys with an unregulated thyroid condition, the kidneys appear to be fine but once the cat is well managed, which means the blood pressure is normal in the cat’s body, elevating kidney enzymes can become a real problem so it’s important that if you choose to use oral medical management that your doctor is
not only monitoring thyroid levels but also kidney values, which can become a secondary problem pretty quickly. If your cat has negative side effects from Methimazole management, certainly surgical removal of the benign tumors would be my next recommendation because it’s curative. No more pills. The problem is done but the procedure has to be performed by a very skilled surgeon.

There is another form of traditional therapy called radioactive iodine. Radioactive iodine is exactly what it sounds. Specialized radioactive-approved facility where you take your cat to does one single injection of I-131, which is a radioactive form of iodine that attacks the diseased portion of your cat’s thyroid gland. Now, common sense would maybe tell you that injecting a radioactive substance into your cat is a little spooky and I would agree with that. This is an approved form of therapy not only for people; it’s also a very common therapy for cats. However, there are some downsides: 1. You are injecting radioactive material into your cat; 2. It’s very expensive; and 3. It can be stressful because you have to leave your cat at the radioactive-approved facility for 7 to 10 days until your cat’s levels of radioactivity dropped down to where it’s safe to take your cat home. It kind of sounds a little scary. Many people have had great success using it but that is a form of treatment that I would certainly encourage you to pursue all of the ups and downs because there are positives and negatives associated certainly with that particular form of invasive therapy.

**Explore Integrative Medicine to Avoid Side Effects from Using Traditional Treatments**

Last but certainly not least, I would have you consider investigating integrative medicine. Of course, being an integrative physician myself, I would tell you that there are a whole host of natural things that can be provided to your cat to help manage hyperthyroidism if the disease is caught early. In fact, in one very small study, 8 out of 13 cats had clinical resolution of the signs of hyperthyroidism using clinical homeopathy or classical homeopathy. And so it is important, if you’re interested in pursuing treatment for your cat’s thyroid problem, my first recommendation is to start with classical homeopathy or some other form of natural therapy that can completely avoid all the side effects of using some of the traditional approaches.