

Health and welfare information about your cat from Vetlexicon Felis.



Myositis

If your pet suddenly finds it difficult or painful to take exercise they may have myositis. Myositis is an inflammation of the muscle. It can be a serious and painful condition and may be an early indicator that your pet is ill in some other way. A veterinary examination is important to try to identify a cause of the problem so that appropriate treatment can be given.

What is myositis?

Literally, myositis means muscle (myo-) inflammation (-sitis). This type of muscle disease (myopathy) represents a group of different diseases which all share the feature of inflammatory cells within the muscle. Myositis can affect:

- Just one muscle
- Groups of muscles, eg muscles used in chewing found on the top and side of the head (masticatory muscle myositis), or muscles moving the eyeball (extra-ocular muscle myositis) or
- All muscles in the body (polymyositis, dermatomyositis and necrotising myopathy).

What causes myositis?

The inflammation in the muscle can be due to:

- Response of the body to an infectious agent (parasite or virus) within the muscle (*infectious myositis*).
- Abnormal immune reaction of the body directed against the muscle (*immune-mediated myositis*). No-one knows why the immune system suddenly becomes over-excited and attacks the muscles in this way in some animals.
- Myositis may also be associated with cancer. Inflammation may develop first and turn into cancer with time (pre-cancerous change), or cancer elsewhere in the body may trigger an immune reaction to the muscle (paracancerous effect).

How would I know if my pet has myositis?

The signs caused by myositis can vary considerably depending on the muscles affected. An animal with a generalised myositis (polymyositis) has a stiff stilted gait, muscle pain, weakness and cannot exercise normally. In the early stages of disease generalised muscle swelling occurs and later the muscles are wasted. Other signs associated with polymyositis include difficulty swallowing and sometimes breathing problems.

How will my vet know my pet has myositis?

Myositis can be confirmed by taking a sample of muscle tissue for examination. This will show the inflammatory cells within the muscle. Other tests may be necessary to eliminate a potential infectious (blood test) or to rule out the presence of a cancer in the body (chest and abdominal X-rays and ultrasound).

Is there any treatment for myositis?

Treatment of myositis is usually aimed at trying to counteract the over-excitation of the immune system by giving drugs to suppress the immune system (immunosuppressives). The main treatment is usually high doses of steroids (prednisolone). Other immunosuppressive drugs (such as azathioprine or cytarabine) can also be used in combination with steroids. The short-term aim of the treatment is to return the animal to normal using high doses of medication. When the disease is controlled the quantity of drugs is slowly reduced (hopefully without the animal relapsing). The long-term aim is to take the animal off any drugs, but usually this is not possible and a continued low dose of medication is needed to keep the signs at bay.

All drugs can have side-effects and immunosuppressives are particularly powerful drugs. The main risk of using these drugs is that the immune system will be shutdown too much, making your cat more prone to infection.

In the rare cases where cancer or an infection is found to be the underlying cause of the myositis, treatment should be directed against this. Unfortunately, the outlook in these cases is not good.

Will my cat get better?

The outlook for animals with myositis is usually fair - although improvement may not be seen for several weeks. Corticosteroids can cause muscle wastage and this may give the impression that the animal is getting worse, even though the disease is well controlled. Your vet will need to monitor your pet closely whilst it is receiving treatment, both to ensure it is getting better and also to check that the drugs are not causing any serious unwanted effects.

If an underlying cause of the myositis can be identified and successfully treated it may be possible to withdraw medication altogether without the condition relapsing.