



Your cat has diabetes—now what?

Diabetes is one of the most common feline endocrine disorders, but caring for a diabetic cat isn't as hard as it sounds. Here's the lowdown on how to keep your feline friend healthy.

Your cat has been diagnosed with diabetes, which happens when the pancreas fails to produce adequate amounts of insulin, a hormone necessary for controlling blood glucose (sugar) levels. Diabetes is usually easy to diagnose. Most cats show classic signs, including excessive urination, excessive thirst, strong appetite, and weight loss. High blood sugar levels and the presence of sugar in the urine usually allow for a straightforward diagnosis, but occasionally some additional tests may be necessary before arriving at a definitive diagnosis.

Care for your cat with diabetes

Caring for a diabetic cat takes a strong commitment from both you and your veterinarian. Every day, you'll need to give your cat insulin injections, watch his or her diet, and monitor his or her behavior. But don't get the impression that you're a prisoner in your home—you're not. You will, however, have to pay much closer attention to your cat's needs and behavior, and you'll need to find someone to care for your cat if you leave for an extended period of time. Our practice offers boarding services for diabetic cats, and we can also recommend a cat sitter if you prefer to have your cat cared for at home.

Treating diabetes involves medication and special diets. Most diabetic cats receive insulin injections. A very few can be managed with oral glucose-lowering drugs. In most cases, insulin injections are the best choice and are actually much easier to administer than pills. It has also been shown that a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet is ideal for diabetic cats. We'll recommend a therapeutic diet that has been designed specifically for diabetic cats.

Insulin and your cat

Here are some basic tips on preparing and giving insulin injections to your cat.

1. Keep insulin refrigerated at all times. It must never be frozen.
2. Before withdrawing insulin for injection, gently mix the contents of the bottle so that the insulin looks uniform. But don't excessively shake the bottle since this can damage the fragile insulin molecules.
3. Draw up a large amount of insulin into the syringe, flick the syringe a few times with your finger to dislodge any air bubbles, and then push any air bubbles and excess insulin back into the vial, stopping when you reach the number of units that have been prescribed.
4. Insert the needle and then inject the insulin without having to adjust your grip. Some people put the needle in the skin, and then let go of the syringe for a second so they can get their finger over the plunger. This makes the needle bounce around, which can sometimes hurt. It's best if one finger is poised over the plunger when you insert the needle into the skin. Food rewards often help.
5. Give your pet a treat right after an insulin shot to teach it not to fear the injections.
6. Give insulin at the same time every day. Most cats receive insulin twice daily. Choose the time frame that works best for you. If you're most likely to be home at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m., give the injections at these times. If 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. work better for you, that's fine. As long as you're consistent, there should be few problems.
7. Don't reuse needles. After one use, needles are no longer sterile, and bacteria from the cat's skin can contaminate the entire bottle of insulin when a used needle is stuck back into the vial. Also, needles become dull very quickly, and dull needles hurt when they're inserted into the skin.

Watch for warning signs of diabetic problems

Without insulin, your cat can't survive. But too much insulin is just as deadly as too little. A potentially dangerous condition called hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) can result from an overdose of insulin. You must watch your cat carefully for signs of hypoglycemia, which include:

- weakness
- lack of coordination
- acting confused
- lapsing into a coma.

If your cat experiences any of these signs, contact your veterinarian immediately. While waiting for veterinary assistance, give your cat corn syrup or honey, slowly, using a syringe to squirt it into the mouth. If your cat is able to eat, offer normal food. If your cat is having seizures or is semi-comatose, rub a tablespoon of corn syrup or honey onto the gums. You should see a noticeable effect within five minutes of administering the syrup.

Overdoses can happen with an incorrect dose or a duplicated dose because one family member didn't know another family member already had already given an injection.

- If more than one person is handling a diabetic cat, good communication between family members is essential to avoid this situation.
- If you have a longhaired cat, it can be difficult to tell if the injection went beneath the skin or merely beneath the hair. If, after you administer the injection, you see that some insulin has escaped the skin and you're not sure how much (or if any) went in, it's safest to skip that dose and proceed normally at the next appropriate time. An occasional underdose is much less dangerous than an overdose.

There may be occasions where your cat's diabetes is uncontrolled, or when other illnesses arise. These setbacks may feel especially stressful and heartbreaking considering the extra effort and commitment you've been giving. The frustration, anger, sadness, fear, and guilt are normal feelings one experiences when caring for a cat with a chronic health condition.

Don't ignore these feelings, but don't dwell on them either. Reach out to friends, family, and our doctors and team here for emotional support.

Although most diabetic cats remain reasonably healthy, some can develop a condition called ketoacidosis, in which the cat becomes extremely depressed with signs such as vomiting, diarrhea, loss of appetite, dehydration, and coma. Ketoacidosis is a potentially life-threatening emergency, and any diabetic cat with these clinical signs should be evaluated by a veterinarian immediately. Diabetics are also more prone to infections, with kidney, bladder, and oral infections being most common.

We're here for you

Friends, relatives, and co-workers may make insensitive comments that you must be crazy to care for a chronically ill pet that requires daily injections. Try not to let unsupportive comments sway you. These people obviously do not understand the special bond that you share with your cat. Only another pet lover will understand your choice to give such dedicated care to your cat. Your good friends will understand your choice and will be supportive, and one of them may even be suitable to be a backup caretaker.

At first, you may wonder if you're upsetting your cat when you give the injections, or whether changing diets bothers him or her. These changes are difficult at first, but they're necessary and life-saving, and will soon become a routine part of daily life for both of you. In fact, you and your cat will most likely develop an even stronger bond due to all of the extra attention and care that you will be giving. Although the initial shock and fear that you feel when you've been told that your cat has diabetes can be overwhelming, keep in mind that the prognosis for diabetic cats is good; diabetic cats do not go blind from cataracts like diabetic dogs do, and they do not suffer circulatory problems or other problems that human diabetics experience. Diabetes is a treatable condition and your cat can live a normal, happy, healthy life.

Adapted from Dr. Arnold Plotnick, DACVIM (feline), Manhattan Cat Specialists, New York, N.Y.