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DIABETES

Diabetes mellitus, commonly called “sugar diabetes” or just “diabetes,” is a disease caused by failure of the pancreas to produce adequate amounts of insulin. Insulin's job is to allow the cells of the body to take in and use glucose (sugar). Therefore, insufficient insulin results in high blood sugar levels.

High blood glucose levels result in the four typical signs of diabetes: 1) weight loss, 2) a ravenous appetite, 3) increased urination, and 4) increased thirst. Not all of these signs are readily seen in every diabetic animal, but we expect that you will have seen at least two of them.

The four clinical signs of diabetes are also present in other diseases. Therefore, clinical signs alone are not sufficient to make a diagnosis. The two most important laboratory tests are the blood glucose level and a urinalysis. Diabetic animals have high blood glucose levels and have glucose present in the urine.

Life With Diabetes

There are some definite financial obligations involved in treating a diabetic pet; however, the majority of expenditure occurs during the regulation phase. Once the pet is stable, the costs for insulin, syringes, and rechecks are not as bad.

However, the financial aspect is not the only factor. This disease also requires a substantial amount of involvement on your part to keep your pet regulated. Most pets will require twice daily injections. You will also need to monitor your pet's progress and be aware of signs that it is not well regulated. This takes a lot of time and commitment on your part. If you are not dedicated to keeping your diabetic pet regulated, you will be disappointed with the results and the expenses associated with poor regulation. However, most diabetic pets can be regulated and continue to be a pleasant part of your family. But, your commitment and involvement are critical.

Insulin

Insulin is given by injection to replace the insulin that your pet's pancreas cannot produce. The injections are made with a tiny needle, so most animals do not find them unpleasant. They are given just under the skin in areas in which there is no chance of injuring vital organs. The technique is much better tolerated by pets than most owners expect. Some animals require that injections be given twice daily, as close to a 12 hour interval as is feasible for you to do on a consistent basis.



Alternative Treatment

There are several oral drugs that are effective for diabetes in humans. These drugs improve the body's ability to use insulin. Some of these have been used on diabetic pets but they normally do not work.

Diet and Feeding Schedule

The ideal diet for a diabetic dog is one that is low in sugar and high in fiber. But, because of the importance of consistency, it is better for your pet to eat the same quantity of a less desirable food every day than to eat a preferred food on an inconsistent basis.

Interestingly, most diabetic cats do best on a diet that is low in carbohydrates and high in protein. Hills makes a food called **m/d** that is great for overweight cats with diabetes. We often use high quality kitten food for underweight diabetic cats. Occasionally in obese cats, once the diabetes is regulated with insulin, the need for insulin gradually reduces until they can be maintained on **Hills m/d** diet alone.

In the past, specific feeding times have been strongly recommended. Most of these schedules recommended feeding with each insulin injection or before and four hours after each insulin injection. Newer evidence says that specific feeding times are not as important as we once thought. In fact, leaving food in the bowl at all times for free-choice feeding means that the blood glucose level is likely to be more consistent throughout the day.

Monitoring

One of the most important aspects of controlling a diabetic pet is monitoring that you do at home. If your pet is monitored closely, the signs of loss of improper regulation can be detected early and appropriate adjustments made. Monitoring should occur in two ways: 1) Using a glucometer to measure the blood sugar, and 2) Observation of the signs of diabetes.

In order to monitor your pet's blood sugar you will have to purchase a glucometer. These are available at any pharmacy, or a friend with diabetes may have an older functioning glucometer that they are willing to give you. A drop of blood is obtained by pricking the flap of the ear (cats) or inner lip (dogs), which is then analysed by the glucometer to measure your pet's blood sugar. This testing is best done at home because stress naturally increases the blood sugar, so as soon as you bring your pet in to the hospital, the readings will be falsely high. These tests will have to be performed more at first, as we try to get the correct dose of insulin figured out. Once your pet is regulated this testing can be performed less frequently.

In clinic testing may be performed periodically, depending on how our pet is doing at home.

Emergencies

Most diabetics have their ups and downs, but the most serious complication of treatment is dropping the blood sugar too low. These pets will seem weak and shaky, and may have trouble walking. The treatment is sugar supplement, such as syringing corn syrup or honey into the mouth, and to offer food as they come around. If it drops low enough can lead to a coma and death. Any diabetic who loses consciousness needs to be hospitalized immediately.

