

Radioactive Iodine Treatment of Hyperthyroidism in Cats Frequently Asked Questions for Clients

The Small Animal Internal Medicine Service offers Radioactive Iodine Therapy for cats with Hyperthyroidism. Hyperthyroidism is usually caused by a benign tumor in the thyroid gland that over-produces thyroid hormone. This can lead to a variety of abnormalities including weight loss, changes in appetite, vomiting, diarrhea and high blood pressure. It is one of the most common diseases in older cats. The disease can be treated with oral medication, topical medication placed on the ear, surgical removal of the thyroid gland, or radioactive iodine therapy. Recently, a prescription diet (Hill's y/d) has been marketed for treatment of hyperthyroidism but its long term efficacy and safety are unknown. Treatment with medication will control the disease but the medication must be given lifelong. Generally, Radioactive Iodine Treatment is considered the treatment of choice for hyperthyroid cats.

The following are some Frequently Asked Questions about feline hyperthyroidism and Radioactive Iodine Treatment. These are general guidelines and the answers may not apply to every patient. Please ask your veterinarian about the treatment options that are best for your pet, or make an appointment with the Small Animal Internal Medicine Service for a consultation.

1. How does Radioactive Iodine Treatment work?

Radioactive iodine is injected under the skin and concentrates in the thyroid gland. The radioactivity penetrates a few millimeters into the tissue and destroys the overactive thyroid cells. The effect on other tissues is negligible.

2. How successful is it?

Radioactive iodine treatment is considered the safest and most effective permanent treatment for hyperthyroidism in cats. It is successful in curing the disease in 95% of cats. Cats survive on average over 5 years after treatment with radioactive iodine. In comparison, the average survival time with medication or with surgery is only 2 years. The average survival time with the prescription diet is unknown.

3. How much does radioactive iodine treatment cost?

After the diagnosis has been made, the estimate for radioactive iodine treatment is \$950-1250. This includes the exam, radioactive iodine administration, and 3-5 days hospitalization. While this is a higher upfront cost to treat hyperthyroidism than medication or a prescription diet, it is significantly less expensive than those options over the lifetime of the cat.

4. Why does my cat have to stay in the hospital and how long will she/he be there?

Federal and state regulations require that we limit radiation exposure to the public by isolating cats treated with radioactive iodine until the radiation decreases to a pre-set level. In the majority of cases, a cat is cleared after 3-5 days. While in isolation, they are cared for daily and have food, water, toys, and fresh litter available to them. We even have soft music for their listening pleasure!

5. What will I have to do after I bring my cat home?

Your cat will continue to give off low levels of radioactivity for a few weeks after treatment. You will be given a list of instructions for caring for your cat after his/her release from the hospital. These are designed to limit radiation exposure to you, your family, and the general public. They include keeping your cat strictly indoors for 15 days after coming home, limited contact with other pets or people, and absolutely no contact with children or pregnant women for 30 days. Special precautions must also be taken to dispose of litter box waste by using only flushable litter for 1 month.

6. When does my cat need follow-up thyroid checks? How often?

We generally recommend a recheck with either your regular veterinarian or with the Internal Medicine Service 1 month after treatment. At this time the cat's thyroid level is checked, along with indicators of kidney function. Based on these results, additional monitoring of your pet's kidney function may be recommended.

7. Will I have to give my pet any additional medications after treatment?

The vast majority of cats do not need additional medication after treatment. Some cats will have an unmasking of underlying renal disease after the excess thyroid hormone is removed. These cats may need medications to slow the progression of their renal disease. In a minority of cases, the thyroid levels will become low and the cat might develop symptoms of underactive thyroid. In these cases, we will consider giving them a daily thyroid hormone supplement.

8. What are possible long term side effects of the treatment?

The treatment itself does not cause any long term side effects in most cats. It is important to know, however, that the elevated thyroid hormone can mask underlying kidney disease prior to treatment. Because Radioactive Iodine Treatment is irreversible, every effort is made to screen cats for kidney disease prior to therapy. This is usually accomplished by first treating the cat with the oral or topical medication for treatment of hyperthyroidism for at least 1 month. Blood work is monitored to see if there is an effect on kidney values. Your veterinarian will also monitor your cat's kidney function after treatment.

9. How do I make an appointment to have my cat evaluated for Radioactive Iodine Treatment?

Appointments may be made with the Small Animal Internal Medicine Service by calling 614-292-3551. We encourage cat owners to discuss Radioactive Iodine Treatment with their veterinarian prior to the appointment to determine if this therapy is right for your cat.