

# Pancreas AWARENESS

**KNOWING THE SIGNS CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE FOR CATS WITH THESE PANCREATIC DISORDERS.**



BY STEPHANIE BOUCHARD

ELENA EFIMOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK

says Jennifer Bolser, DVM, chief clinic veterinarian at the Humane Society of Boulder Valley in Boulder, Colo. "Dogs are vomiting. They have pain in their abdomen. [In] cats, the two most common symptoms are lethargy and anorexia. ... It can be a very hard thing to clue in on because the symptoms are just kind of vague. ... [and] cats are great at hiding their diseases."

Cats with pancreatitis might also present with vomiting and, rarely, abdominal tenderness, Bolser and Carney say.

To get a diagnosis, veterinarians need to rely on a combination of techniques, Carney says. They need to get a good patient history and do a thorough physical exam. Some cats might show a reaction if the area near the pancreas is palpated. Veterinarians who practice acupuncture might feel a tensing or change in heart rate in their feline patient if they activate the pancreatic alarm point, she says. An inflamed pancreas might be visible on ultrasound, and cat-specific blood tests can now help determine a diagnosis of pancreatitis.

The prognosis for cats diagnosed with pancreatitis is dependent on a number of factors, Bolser says. Those presenting with acute pancreatitis have the poorest prognosis and need intensive, in-hospital care. For those with the chronic form of pancreatitis, the prognosis is usually good, depending on how the patient responds to treatment and if there are other complications, such as the presence of other diseases, like inflammatory bowel disease.

Treatment for cats with the chronic form is largely supportive, Bolser says, such as maintaining hydration with intravenous or subcutaneous fluids, providing antiemetics if the cat is vomiting, and offering pain medications.

Diet and vigilant observation are

**Chronic and Acute Pancreatitis**

Pancreatitis is an inflammatory condition of the pancreas, an organ located in the abdomen near the stomach and liver. The pancreas is responsible for regulating blood sugar levels and the production of enzymes needed for digestion.

What causes pancreatitis is "the \$64,000 question," says Hazel Carney, DVM, a feline medicine and behavioral specialist practicing at WestVet in Garden City, Idaho. Specific causes of the chronic form of pancreatitis are not known, although

chronic inflammation is a suspect. Acute cases are more likely brought on by some sort of trauma, she says, such as an acute systemic infection or being hit by a car. Unlike in dogs, a high-fat diet does not appear to cause pancreatitis in cats.

The condition has been and is still quite often unrecognized and under-diagnosed in cats for two main reasons, Carney says. The symptoms are vague and, until recently, no cat-specific testing protocols were available.

"Pancreatitis is very hard to diagnose,"

incredibly important to managing chronic pancreatitis, Carney says. A special or prescription diet is not necessary, but a nutritious, consistent, reliable diet is essential. And crucial to heading off misery brought on by pancreatic flare-ups is staying attuned to your cat and recognizing early signs of nausea or pain.

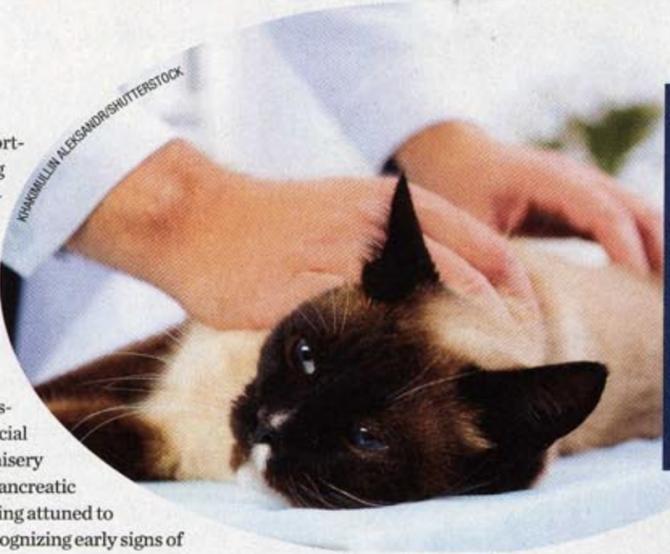
**A Rare Pancreatic Disorder**

Sometimes chronic pancreatitis can lead to a rare disorder in cats called exocrine pancreatic insufficiency, or EPI. That's what happened to McDowell's Timothy. He recovered well from his first bout with pancreatitis, but he kept losing weight. "He would eat and acted like he hadn't eaten anything," McDowell says. Timothy constantly foraged for food around the house and ate things cats would not normally have any interest in eating, such as avocados, peaches or bread left on the counter. He would open the pantry and get into the dry pasta, and snatch cookies out of the cookie jar.

And his poop took on a foul odor — so odiferous that McDowell could smell it across the house, on another floor.

The manic eating, weight loss and foul-smelling poop or diarrhea are some of the most obvious symptoms of EPI, a disease caused by an insufficient production and release of digestive enzymes from the pancreas, which leads to destruction of the pancreas and the inability of the body to sufficiently digest food.

The most common cause of EPI is thought to be pancreatitis, although some rare causes of EPI are obstructions of the pancreatic ducts due, for instance, to tumor formation, and some parasite infections, such as fluke, says Jan Suchodolski, Dr.med.vet., of the gastrointestinal lab at Texas A&M University's Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences school,



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where testing protocols for feline pancreatitis and EPI were pioneered.

EPI is not curable in most cats, but the treatment of cats with EPI is usually quite successful with supplementation of pancreatic enzymes of cow or pig origin, Suchodolski says. There are commercial powders and capsules available that contain these enzymes, or you can get cow or pig pancreases from your local butcher or some online providers.



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Most cats respond to the enzyme supplementation within a week, he says, which is what happened with Timothy. He quickly gained back the weight he had lost (and then some, McDowell says), stopped foraging around the house and regained his playful, affectionate nature.

EPI in cats is very rare, and getting information about it, how to treat it and finding treatment resources, is not easy — not even many veterinarians know much about the disease in cats, says Carol Pilger, cat mom to Soleil, who was diagnosed with

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Texas A&M University GI lab is at the forefront of feline pancreatitis and EPI research: <http://vetmed.tamu.edu/gilab/research/pancreatitis-information>.

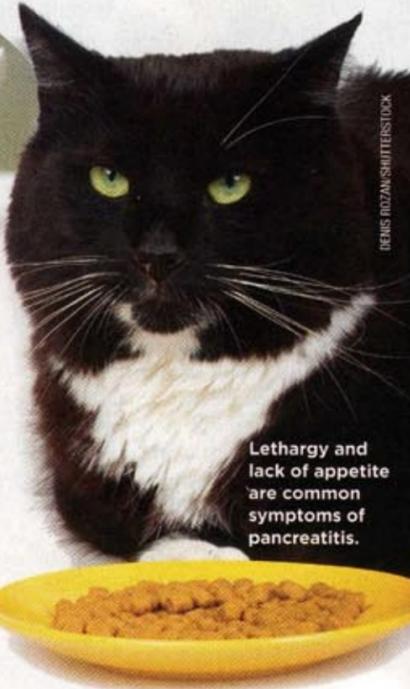
EPI4Dogs has a small section dedicated to cats. You'll find Pilger's and McDowell's stories here as well as disease management tips: [www.epi4dogs.com/catsgetepitoo.htm](http://www.epi4dogs.com/catsgetepitoo.htm)

Join these Yahoo! Groups: EPIin-Cats and Feline Pancreatitis Support.

EPI three years ago. "When you go to the vet, most of them [are] in uncharted waters, and they'll tell you they don't know much about it," she says.

But awareness is growing, and more resources can be found online, including a support group Pilger has started that is open to cat parents with EPI and veterinarians seeking more information for their clients and themselves. 🐾

*Stephanie Bouchard is a freelance writer and author of The Lap-Reluctant Cat, a humorous gift book for cat lovers, and cat mom to Avalon, a 19-year-old cat with EPI. They live on the coast of Maine.*



Lethargy and lack of appetite are common symptoms of pancreatitis.

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