

# Urethral Obstruction

If your cat is straining to urinate and only produces a few drops of urine or none at all, he needs to be seen by a veterinarian immediately. Your cat could be experiencing urethral obstruction, and if the problem is not solved, he could die within just a couple of days.

## What is urethral obstruction, and why is it life-threatening?

The urethra is a tube-like structure that carries urine from the bladder to the outside of the body. Sometimes, mineral crystals or stones form in the urethra and block the path to the outside. The blockage is called a urethral plug. Because a male cat's urethra is longer and narrower than a female's, urethral plugs are most often seen in males (whether or not they are neutered). Once a plug has formed, urine builds up in the bladder. This is not only painful to the cat, but can quickly cause kidney damage. The kidneys' job is to release poisonous wastes from the body; when kidneys don't function properly, these poisons accumulate in the bloodstream. The final result, if not treated: a painful death.

## Causes

The cause of urethral plugs is not fully known. Plugs could result from a combination of poor diet and highly concentrated, alkaline (low acid) urine. Possibly, some viruses or bacterial infections trigger their formation. Some experts believe plugs may be linked to tumors, masses, or diseases of the prostate gland in some cases.

## Symptoms

If Kitty is using his litter box often, but with no or little resulting urine; if he is trying to urinate in unusual places; or if he is constantly licking his genitalia, he may have a urethral obstruction. Don't assume your cat is constipated and just give him laxatives. Instead, play it safe and seek veterinary attention. Other signs of obstruction include depression, weakness, vomiting, a lack of appetite, dehydration, and collapse.

## Treatment

Urethral obstruction is an emergency. Yet, if the symptoms are noticed early and professional treatment is obtained immediately, your cat's chance of recovery is almost 100 percent.

Your veterinarian will first try to relieve the obstruction by applying gentle pressure to the bladder and manipulating the penis. If the plug remains, the doctor may insert a catheter through the urethra into the bladder (with the cat sedated or under a light anesthesia) or suction urine directly from the bladder with a needle and syringe.

Usually, one of the above procedures will remove the obstruction. As a last resort, however, or if the cat is prone to obstructions, surgery is required. Even if the initial procedures do work, obstruction may recur in some cats within days or weeks.

## What does the surgery entail?

The surgical procedure is called a perineal urethrostomy. Your veterinarian will remove much of the penis and the narrow portion of the urethra and leave a wider opening for the remaining portion under the anus. Your cat may be hospitalized for several days, and often a catheter will be left in place overnight or longer. Afterward, Kitty may be

treated with antibiotics, urinary antiseptics, and urinary acidifiers. Post-operative care at home will require you to carefully observe Kitty and his potty habits.

Perineal urethrostomy will permanently cure urethral obstruction in 90 percent of male cats. The surgery does not affect the formation of crystals (which result in the plug to begin with), but provides a wider passageway for their release outside the body. Thus, blockages should not recur, but bladder infections might.

## Prevention

All cats should be encouraged to exercise and be kept at a trim, healthy weight. Feed your cat a high quality cat food that is low in magnesium. Entice him to urinate frequently by keeping his litter box clean and always accessible. He should have constant access to plenty of fresh water, as well; if necessary, you can add salt (sparingly) to Kitty's food to encourage him to drink more. If your cat is prone to obstructions, you may need to administer medications, Vitamin C, or a special diet to help keep his urine acidic. You can also increase his urine's overall acidity by restricting feeding to twice daily. This is because the digestive process temporarily lowers the acidity, so every time Kitty eats, his urine becomes less acidic for awhile. In addition, have your veterinarian perform periodic urinalyses on Kitty. This will keep you and your veterinarian alert to the urine's acidity level and to the presence of any crystal formations, so you can stop problems before they start.

Be sure to discuss these and other preventative measures with your veterinarian, and get his or her approval before administering any medication or supplements to your cat.

## Help your cat live a long, full life

Urethral obstruction in cats is becoming less common as more cats are routinely fed premium quality cat foods that discourage crystal formation. But Dr. Valerie Creighton, an AAHA veterinarian who specializes in feline medicine, reminds pet owners that the condition is an emergency situation.

"Urethral obstruction can rapidly become life-threatening over the course of just one to two days," says Dr. Creighton. "Because of this, any cat owner whose male cat is showing signs of frequent efforts of any kind in the litterbox is strongly urged to seek veterinary attention at once."

Now that you know what to look for, you can help ensure your cat's good health by reacting quickly to signs of obstruction.

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