

WOODVALE PARK

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Fears, Phobias, and Anxieties in Cats

Basics

OVERVIEW

- Fear is the feeling of apprehension resulting from the nearness of some situation or object presenting an external threat; the response of the autonomic nervous system prepares the body for “freeze, fight, or flight”; as such, it is a normal behavior, essential for adaptation and survival
- A phobia is a persistent and excessive fear of a specific stimulus, such as a thunderstorm or separation from an attachment figure
- Anxiety is the anticipation of dangers from unknown or imagined origins that results in normal body reactions (known as “physiologic” reactions) associated with fear; anxiety may occur in the aftermath of a fear-producing event or as a result of unrelated environmental changes that are unpredictable

GENETICS

- Genetic component unknown, but possible
- Breed and/or coat color and personality of the cat's father (paternal personality) have been linked to individual personality traits in cats

SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION OF PET

- Any age, sex, or breed of cat

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES IN THE PET

- Signs of fear or anxiety can vary among individual cats and with different stimuli
- In mild cases of fear or anxiety, the cat may become tense and more reactive to environmental stimuli; some cats may retreat to perceived safe hiding places; cats in a panic can become very aggressive or destructive in their attempts to get away from the thing they fear
- Body postures associated with fearful behavior include ears flattened to the back or to the side of the head; crouched body posture when resting or moving; lowered head; tail tucked alongside the body or held low; hair standing up (known as “piloerection”); or “Halloween cat” silhouette
- Pupils often are dilated, and the cat may pant, shake, drool, or shed hair

- If the fear is intense, the cat may lose bladder and bowel control and may express its anal sacs
- Vocalizations are usually minimal, unless the cat is showing defensive behavior in response to a perceived threat
- The cat may pace, vocalize, and solicit attention from the owner
- Urine spraying and destructive scratching may be seen in anxious cats
- Generally no abnormalities directly related to fear or anxiety are found on physical examination, unless the cat has injured itself trying to escape or while seeking shelter during its fright

CAUSES

Fearful behavior in cats can be related to the following factors:

- Genetic influences on temperament
- Learned behavior through negative experiences
- Social stress, population pressure

RISK FACTORS

- Details of the cat's early life, if known, may indicate feral ancestry, a history of poor socialization and environmental exposure, or genetic influences
- Early experience and socialization; cats that did not have the chance to be around other cats or around humans during the first few weeks of life are more likely to be uncomfortable and fearful around them
- If the mother and other adult cats present during the sensitive socialization period for the kittens showed fearful/avoidance behavior, subsequent social learning may enhance the effect

Treatment

HEALTH CARE

- Identify the specific stimulus that provokes the fearful or anxious behavior
- Avoid exposure to the fear-producing stimuli, if possible
- Provide ways for the cat to manage the situation, by noting its “hideout” preferences and creating a “safe place” for the cat to go to if the situation cannot be avoided
- If the cat must be handled while fearful, caution and physical restraint aids (such as cat muzzles, cat bags) should be used to prevent injury to the cat, veterinary clinic personnel, and cat owner
- Desensitization and counter-conditioning to help decrease reactivity to the fear-producing stimulus; systematic desensitization is a program of slowly increasing exposure to the object or situation the cat fears; counter-conditioning consists of enhancing an internal and external environment counter to one of fear, usually accomplished with food rewards or other pleasurable stimuli (such as playing with toys)
- Address secondary problems (such as strained social interactions) subsequent to defensive aggression directed toward humans or other cats, or elimination problems that may be the result of fears or anxieties
- Litter box location may need to be altered if fearful or anxious behavior is limiting the cat's access

ACTIVITY

- Normal interactions with owners encouraged, but contact/outgoing behavior should not be forced

DIET

- Normal dietary routine
- Placement of food and water may need to be altered if fearful or anxious behavior is limiting access to these necessities

Medications

Medications presented in this section are intended to provide general information about possible treatment. The treatment for a particular condition may evolve as medical advances are made; therefore, the medications should not be considered as all inclusive

- Medication can be a helpful adjunct to behavioral modification, if the cat's fearful or anxious behavior is so intense that it interferes with learning or other normal behavioral activities
- No drugs are approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of fears, phobias, or anxieties in cats; your veterinarian will discuss the risks and benefits of medical treatment

- Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), such as fluoxetine and paroxetine
- Tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs), such as clomipramine and amitriptyline
- Buspirone
- Benzodiazepines, such as alprazolam
- Pheromone therapy (Feliway, ComfortZone), initially developed for urine-marking cases, has been used as an aerosol spray and/or room diffuser to calm fearful and anxious cats; apply the product to the environment, not directly to the cat
- Herbal preparations have been suggested for fearful and anxious behaviors in cats; however, no scientific studies have shown benefit in using these preparations in cats with fears, phobias, or anxieties; use of these compounds should be supervised by your pet's veterinarian; use of herbal preparations in combination with other medications may lead to serious drug interactions; consult with your pet's veterinarian before using these products and inform him/her about any such products you are giving your cat

Follow-Up Care

PATIENT MONITORING

- Frequent follow-up either in person or by telephone is necessary, especially during the first few months of treatment, in order to motivate the client and monitor the effectiveness of any adjunct drug treatment

PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- Positive early exposure to people, places, and things during the first 3–9 weeks of a kitten's life and throughout the first year may help prevent some later problems with fearful behavior
- Calm interactions and positive associations with fear-producing stimuli may minimize fear-based reactions

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Secondary behavior problems may arise or persist after the fearful or anxious behavior has diminished, and will need specific treatment

EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Cats with shy personalities or poor socialization histories may show minimal response to treatment
- A realistic “endpoint” of treatment response depends on the cat's background (socialization history, genetic and individual differences in personality), the home situation, and other factors, such as the frequency of natural exposure to fear-producing stimuli
- Medication may help improve, but not totally eliminate, signs of fear, phobia, or anxiety

Key Points

- Identify and clearly describe the cat's body language, behavior, and events or situations that consistently trigger fear or anxiety; information about specific triggers associated with fearful or anxious behavior is helpful in setting up a behavioral modification and environmental management program; triggers are situations or things to which the cat reacts, leading to fearful behaviors
- Stimuli triggering fearful or anxious responses may be very specific (such as a particular individual, noise, or situation) or more generalized (such as all humans, all loud noises)
- Avoid exposure to the fear-producing stimuli, if possible
- Provide ways for the cat to manage the situation, by noting its “hideout” preferences and creating a “safe place” for the cat to go to if the situation cannot be avoided
- Understand behavioral expectations—owner expectations in regards to interactions with themselves and other cats may contribute to the problem
- A realistic “endpoint” of treatment response depends on the cat's background (socialization history, genetic and individual differences in personality), the home situation, and other confounding factors such as the frequency of natural exposure to fear-producing stimuli
- A reasonable treatment plan involves case-tailored behavioral modification and environmental adjustments

Notes

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