

What is involved in treating a diabetic cat at home?

Each diabetic cat is an individual, and each responds differently to treatment. Some diabetic cats are easy to regulate; others are not. Some can be treated with oral medications, while others require insulin injections. Some cats' diabetes is transient-reversing course with the passage of time-while others will require treatment for the remainder of their lives. Different cats respond best to different types of insulin. Regardless of this variability, all diabetic cats do best with consistent medication, consistent feeding, and a stable, stress-free lifestyle.

Insulin

Most diabetic cats require insulin injections administered under their skin twice daily. The injections can be given at home, preferably at the same time each day. Your veterinarian will show you how to give these injections, which are not painful-in fact, most cats are unaware that the injection is being given. Because each is different, the proper type of insulin, dose, and frequency of administration needs to be determined by your veterinarian. Ideally, this is based on an 18- to 24-hour blood glucose profile, obtained through a veterinarian-administered insulin injection and subsequent testing of blood sugar levels at regular intervals throughout the day. Insulin dosage may change with time and may need to be adjusted based on new blood glucose profiles, the results of intermittent blood tests and urine sugar measurements, and the cat's response to therapy.

Oral Hypoglycemic Medications

Healthy diabetic cats can sometimes be successfully treated with glipizide, an orally administered hypoglycemic medication that lowers blood glucose. Adverse side effects, although uncommon, include vomiting, loss of appetite, and liver damage. If you use glipizide, have your cat's glucose levels checked regularly to verify medication's efficacy. Although glipizide works for some diabetic cats, most require insulin injections to successfully control their disease. In addition, the administration of oral medication on a long-term basis is difficult for many cats and their owners; insulin injections may be a better choice for them.

Diet

In addition to medication, an important step in treating diabetes is to alter your cat's diet. Obesity is a major factor in insulin sensitivity, so if your cat is overweight, you will need to help him lose weight gradually. Your veterinarian can tailor a safe weight-loss program, in which your cat loses weight gradually. A high-fiber, high-complex carbohydrate diet not only can achieve weight loss if necessary, but is believed to help control blood sugar levels after eating. (Underweight cats should initially be fed a high calorie diet until they reach their ideal body weight.) Other diabetic cats respond well to carbohydrate-restricted diets. Although diabetic cats have been successfully managed with both types of diets, some cats respond better to high-fiber diets and others to low-carbohydrate diets. Trial and error can help determine the best diet for your cat.

Your cat's feeding routine is also important. While many cats are "free-choice" feeders (i.e., food is left out for them to eat whenever they want), this may not be the ideal routine for a diabetic cat. Ideally, a cat receiving insulin should be fed half its daily food requirement at the time of each injection, with the unconsumed remainder available throughout the day. The timing of feedings is less critical for cats receiving glipizide; nevertheless, food intake should be closely monitored.

What are the potential complications of treating a diabetic cat?

Hypoglycemia-low blood sugar-is a potentially dangerous complication, usually caused by a relative overdose of insulin. Hypoglycemia signs include weakness, listlessness, lack of coordination, convulsions, and coma. Left untreated, hypoglycemia can be fatal. If hypoglycemia develops, the cat