



# Feline Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is the most common hormone imbalance in middle-aged and older cats. It is a serious but manageable condition that affects your cat's metabolism and overall health.



## What is Hyperthyroidism?

The **thyroid glands** are located in your cat's neck and produce hormones called **thyroxine (T<sub>4</sub> and T<sub>3</sub>)** that regulate the body's **metabolism** (the rate at which the body uses energy).

In hyperthyroidism, the thyroid glands become overactive and produce **too much thyroid hormone**. This excess hormone acts like an accelerator, speeding up all of the body's processes.

## Why Does It Happen?

- **Cause:** In the vast majority of cases (over 97%), hyperthyroidism is caused by a **benign (non-cancerous) tumor** called an adenoma, or simple overgrowth of tissue (**hyperplasia**), on one or both thyroid glands. This abnormal tissue produces thyroid hormone uncontrollably.
- **Malignancy:** Less than 3% of cases are due to a malignant (cancerous) tumor, or carcinoma.
- **Risk Factors:** The underlying cause is not definitively known, but it is strongly associated with **middle-aged and older cats** (average age of diagnosis is about 13 years old).

## How Common Is It?

- Hyperthyroidism is a **very common** endocrine (hormonal) disorder in older felines.
- Approximately **1 in 10 (10%) cats over the age of 10** will develop hyperthyroidism.



## Common Signs to Watch For

The signs of hyperthyroidism are related to the accelerated metabolism. They may start subtly and become more severe over time.

Body System	Classic Signs	Less Common Signs
Appetite/Weight	<b>Weight loss</b> despite a <b>ravenous, increased appetite</b> (polyphagia)	Decreased appetite or lethargy (in a form called "apathetic hyperthyroidism")
Thirst/Urination	Increased thirst and urination	Inappropriate urination (outside of the litter box)
Behavior	Restlessness, hyperactivity, increased vocalization (meowing)	
Coat/GI	Unkempt, greasy, or matted coat	Intermittent vomiting and/or diarrhea
Heart	A fast heart rate ( <b>tachycardia</b> ), which can lead to serious heart problems and high blood pressure if untreated.	

**Important Note:** A diagnosis of hyperthyroidism is made with a physical exam (checking for an enlarged thyroid gland) and a simple blood test to measure the thyroid hormone level (T<sub>4</sub>). Other bloodwork and blood pressure checks are important to evaluate overall health, especially kidney and heart function.

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## Treatment Options

There are four main approaches to managing or curing feline hyperthyroidism. We will discuss which option is best for your cat based on their health status and your lifestyle.

### 1. Daily Oral Medication (Methimazole or Carbimazole)

- **What it does:** These drugs block the overproduction of thyroid hormone.
- **Pros:** It is inexpensive in the short-term, reversible, and non-invasive. It can be used as a trial to see if your cat's kidney function changes once thyroid levels normalize.
- **Cons:** It is a **life-long treatment**, requires daily dosing (often twice a day), and necessitates close, regular monitoring (blood tests) to adjust the dose. Side effects like vomiting, lack of appetite, or liver issues can occur. **It controls, but does not cure, the condition.**

### 2. Radioactive Iodine Therapy

- **What it does:** A single, non-surgical injection targets and destroys the abnormal thyroid tissue while sparing the healthy tissue.
- **Pros:** It is considered the **"gold-standard" for a permanent cure** (effective in over 90% of cats) and typically requires only one treatment. It involves no anesthesia.
- **Cons:** It requires a 3- to 5-day hospitalization in an isolation facility due to the radioactive material. There are temporary precautions for owners upon returning home (e.g., restricted contact, specific litter box handling).

### 3. Surgical Removal (Thyroidectomy)

- **What it does:** The overactive thyroid gland(s) are surgically removed under general anesthesia.
- **Pros:** It is a potentially curative, permanent solution.
- **Cons:** Requires general anesthesia, which may be a risk for older cats with other health conditions. It has a risk of complications, such as accidental damage to the nearby parathyroid glands (which regulate calcium).

### 4. Low-Iodine Diet (Therapeutic Food)

- **What it does:** Iodine is essential for making thyroid hormone. A specially formulated, severely iodine-restricted diet prevents the thyroid gland from producing excessive hormone.
- **Pros:** It is non-invasive.
- **Cons:** **It is only effective if the cat eats absolutely nothing else** (no treats, no other foods, no other cat's food). This can be difficult in multi-cat households. It is a life-long management, not a cure.