

Feline Idiopathic Cystitis (FIC)

(Also known as FLUTD: Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease)

FIC describes the following group of clinical signs (note an individual cat might show one or more of these signs):

- bloody urine
- straining to urinate (can easily be mistaken for straining to defecate)
- urinating in unusual places
- urinary blockage (almost exclusively a male cat problem and this is an emergency)
- licking the urinary opening (usually due to pain).

FIC is a syndrome that has been described in cats for nearly 100 years and continues to be a VERY COMMON condition in pet cats.

It is a serious & potentially LIFE THREATENING condition, especially in MALE cats that are at risk of “urethral blockage” (where their bladder becomes blocked and they are unable to urinate). Obstructive FIC is an EMERGENCY as cats are not able to rid their body of urine - which carries fluid, waste toxins and electrolytes. This means they are rapidly at risk of shock, kidney damage, toxicity, heart failure, bladder rupture and more.

Thankfully more often we see cases of UN-obstructed FIC, where cats are still able to pass urine (albeit with difficulty or pain). This remains a very serious condition.



Another complicating factor is that lots of different conditions of the urinary system show SIMILAR SIGNS. These include infections, tumours, bladder stones and kidney disease. We must try to RULE OUT other causes of your cat’s signs before classing them as having “FIC”.

Of all cats with FLUTD:

- 50% will not have a cause that can be identified despite extensive testing.
- 20% will have bladder stones.
- 20% will have a urethral blockage.
- 1-5% will have a true infection.

- 1-5% will have a urinary tract cancer.
- 1-5% will have had trauma to the urinary tract (i.e., have been hit by a car etc.)

Note that hundreds of studies have been conducted to determine which causes are most likely for which cats. What has emerged from these studies is that for young adult cats, a definitive cause for the syndrome CANNOT USUALLY BE FOUND. These cats are said to have feline idiopathic cystitis or FIC, which means bladder inflammation OF UNKNOWN CAUSE.

Q. What does it mean if a cat gets FIC?

- Lower urinary tract signs tend to RECUR over time.
- There seems to be an association with environmental STRESS.
- FIC seems to be a younger cat's problem, with episodes decreasing in frequency as the cat gets older.
- Urinary crystals, previously believed to be central to the syndrome, seem to be involved only in the periphery.
- Numerous therapies have been tried - but it can be hard to be sure what is working.
- As difficult as it is to address a CURRENT episode, more success has been achieved in preventing future episodes.

Q. Why do only some cats get FIC?

We know that cats that get this syndrome have an IMBALANCE in the way their brain controls hormones. In other words, these cats are unusually sensitive to environmental stress and, due to a complicated cascade of events within the body and urinary system, clinical signs manifest in the urinary tract.

Treatment of the NON-obstructed cat?

This means your cat is still able to urinate – perhaps with difficulty & pain - but their bladder is not fully blocked. Your vet will determine if your cat is blocked (called “urethral obstruction”) based on a clinical exam and sometimes sedation for further diagnostic tests. Note any cat that is currently not obstructed is AT RISK of becoming blocked if their urinary signs are not dealt with – especially MALE cats- so careful monitoring is essential.

***** *Pain relief***

This is obviously essential, as an inflamed bladder can cause significant discomfort to our cats. Painful animals tend to heal more slowly, can refuse to eat and drink, and can be difficult to handle. Anti-inflammatory medication can be especially useful early on, as they offer pain relief as well as helping to relax areas of the urinary tract that might be swollen or in spasm.

***** *Fluid therapy (a drip)***

Flushing out your cat's urinary system is paramount, as we need to keep urine flowing and get the debris out. Hydration is also essential, and can make cats feel so much better in themselves.

Anti-anxiety medications

These medications address the stress component that is believed to be a major trigger of FIC. The problem seems to be that these medications typically require several WEEKS to reach maximum effect in most patients. This suggests that these medications are better for preventing future episodes rather than for curtailing an active episode.

Antibiotics

While true infection is NOT typically involved in FIC, antibiotics might occasionally be prescribed. There is controversy about antibiotic use - since only 1-2% of cats seem to truly have infection.

Prevention of FUTURE episodes

Many management strategies have been proposed to prevent FURTHER episodes of this painful and potentially life-threatening condition... but only some techniques have been proven effective:

Increasing water consumption to DILUTE urine

- This is shown to be ESSENTIAL in many cases of FIC
- Via feeding CANNED / wet food (as most or ALL of your cats diet - no more dry bikkies!)

- Adding multiple WATER sources, in various locations is important. Consider a cat drinking fountain (some cats love to drink flowing water). Flavouring water can be really helpful too (like adding a little bit of tuna water)

Dietary management

- There are now prescription diets that have been formulated especially for FIC. They focus on dilution, stress reduction, urine pH, the dissolution of crystals and excellent balanced nutrition.
- Diet can be an ESSENTIAL part of management of FIC, and based on your individual cat's needs your vet will recommend one of several special urinary diets.
- Note that urinary diets should be fed as 100% of the diet – if you add in other food types it will DILUTE OUT the usefulness of prescription diets.
- These diets are more expensive than your average cat food – and for good reason. Think of them as a form of 'medication', rather than just cat food.

Environmental enrichment / relieving environmental stress

- Perhaps the MOST IMPORTANT management strategy
- Most cats are fine with the domestic lifestyle but the FIC cat is special and has special sensitivity
- Stress can be minimized by allowing CHOICES for the cat in terms of where to play, rest, eat, and eliminate.
- It is also essential to recognise that ACCESS TO RESOURCES can be highly stressful for cats. So MULTI cat households are far more stressful for cats. Even cats that all seem to "get on well" can have much higher stress levels.
- Anti-anxiety medications may be warranted long term / ongoing. Remembering there is a time delay of several weeks for these sorts of medications to kick in.

Here is a summary of recommendations that have been published:

- Play time with owners or other pets, if the cat chooses to
- Climbing access
- Each cat should have convenient access to a PRIVATE rest area where other animals will not disturb him - or an escape route should he be bothered. There should be no loud appliances in the rest area

- Scratching posts should be available
- Toys should be regularly rotated and replaced
- Each cat should be able to choose warmer and cooler areas within the home.
- There should be a litter box for EACH cat, PLUS one extra. Litter boxes should be located in well-ventilated areas and should be kept clean. Boxes should be washed out weekly with a minimally scented detergent. Unscented clumping litter seems to be best – but cats have “litter preference” so you may need to try a few. If there is more than one floor in the home, there should be a box on each floor. Litter boxes should be private enough that other animals will not be bothering the cat. Do not have litter trays near food & water.
- Each cat should have her own food and water bowls. Feeding/watering stations should be safe so that other animals (like dogs) will not be startling the cat. Bowls should be washed daily.
- Minimise CHANGE (eg like diet)

Many people are surprised to find that environmental enrichment has been effective in prevention... But remember that what makes a cat vulnerable to FIC is a problem with the neuro-chemicals involved in stress.