

Technically Speaking by Lyn T. Garson, CVT

Sorting Out Feline Seizures

Let's face it—seizures are scary. For a pet owner, witnessing a seizure may be the most emotional event imaginable, especially considering nothing can be done to stop one from happening. However, while these episodes prove difficult for the owner, pets do not suffer pain during a seizure, and cats diagnosed with seizure disorders can live an otherwise normal quality of life.

Seizures consist of involuntary muscle stiffness or contractions, which usually involve the entire body, yet sometimes affect only one side, or a specific body region. Seizures can occur in varying degrees, from a slight loss of motor control, to more severe episodes causing the cat to fall on its side and lose consciousness. The cat may appear blind—eyes staring blankly-- or their eyes may “scan” back and forth rapidly. Drooling, urinating and defecating are common during seizures.

A true seizure is characterized by three phases: the aura stage-- prior to the actual seizure cats may seem disoriented or restless, display strange behaviors, vocalize, or may be unusually clingy. The seizure itself-- lasting from a few seconds to several minutes. The post seizure stage-- muscle stiffness/contractions stop, the cat is dazed, and may be exhausted, confused, or uncoordinated. This third stage can last from several minutes to hours.

The cause of seizures varies depending on the cat's age. A thorough veterinary examination and blood testing are the first steps in determining possible causes. Dr. Linda Nachtigal, a veterinarian at Glastonbury Animal Hospital in Connecticut, initially checks for low blood glucose levels, infectious diseases, poisoning, and kidney or liver dysfunction. She has found infectious diseases to be the most common cause of seizures in younger cats. “I had two positive cases of toxoplasmosis recently that were the cause of seizures,” said Dr. Nachtigal. “Treatment with antibiotics was successful in both cases.” Dr. Nachtigal also recommends referral to a neurologist for MRI studies and additional diagnostic testing when appropriate.

“Primary brain tumors, specifically a meningioma, are a common cause of seizures in older cats,” said Dr. Sheila Carrera Justiz, a third year resident in Neurology and Neurosurgery at the Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine. “Strokes can also cause seizures in an older cat, especially one that has high blood pressure or kidney disease.”

Idiopathic epilepsy is a term used when no cause for recurrent seizures can be found. Cats diagnosed with epilepsy can be managed with phenobarbital, a medication given once daily by mouth. “Phenobarbital is very effective and reliable in its seizure control,” said Dr. Carrera Justiz. However, she adds, “It is important to know that it is not likely the seizures will stop completely, even with medication. The goal of anticonvulsant therapy is to reduce the severity and frequency of seizures.”

If your cat experiences a seizure-- stay calm! Do not handle your cat until the seizure is over. Cats are unaware of what is happening, won't recognize their owners, and may clamp down with their teeth causing severe bites if touched. There is no concern of cats "swallowing" their tongue.

Recently, Our Companions found a forever home for Rambo, a cat diagnosed with epilepsy. Won't you open your heart to a cat with epilepsy?