



Urinary Tract Infections

Keys to treatment and prevention

By Susan Easterly

It hurts! That is the first thing you should know about urinary tract infections (UTIs), which commonly affect dogs and, more rarely, cats. Infection-causing bacteria—the usual culprits—can wreak havoc on your pet’s health. Fortunately, you can quickly relieve your pet’s discomfort with prompt veterinary treatment.

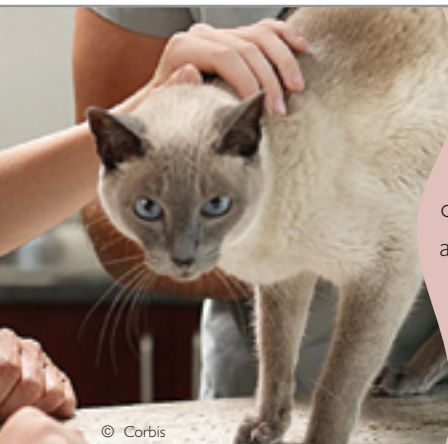
SO WHAT IS A UTI?

A UTI occurs when bacteria colonize areas of the urinary tract that should be sterile. Normally, the bodies of dogs and cats naturally help prevent bacteria from adhering and

multiplying in the urinary tract. “A UTI develops when something compromises your pet’s natural defense mechanisms, allowing the bacteria that normally live around the urethral opening to ascend up the urethra and into the urinary bladder,” explains Dr. S. Dru Forrester, a noted veterinary internist.

WHICH PETS ARE MOST AT RISK?

Statistically, UTIs affect more dogs than cats, while female pets—with shorter, wider urethras—are more frequently diagnosed than males.



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Your Pet's Diet: How It Can Help

Nutritional management is key to treating pets with urinary tract disorders. The right food can help reduce the risk of many of these diseases. For example, your veterinarian may advise feeding canned food to increase your pet's water consumption. If your cat shows signs of a lower urinary tract problem, your veterinarian may recommend Hill's® Prescription Diet® c/d® Multicare Feline.

The long, narrow urethra in males provides an anatomic barrier against UTIs, and “cats have very concentrated urine, which may be one reason they have UTIs less often,” Dr. Forrester notes. However, although UTIs are rare in young and middle-aged cats, they occur more frequently in older cats.

RED FLAGS

Of course, your dog or cat does not care into what category she falls. Urinary problems can cause discomfort and pain; your pet will count on you to relieve it. Take her to your veterinarian if you notice any of these warning signs of a UTI:

- Blood in urine (which causes red- or pink-tinted urine)
- Difficulty urinating (straining)
- Frequent attempts to urinate
- Passing small amounts of urine
- Urinary accidents

In addition, fever, lethargy, or tenderness in the lower abdominal area signals a potentially serious health problem that should not be ignored. Keep in mind that other urinary problems and diseases may exhibit similar signs.

THE GOLD STANDARD

It is important to realize that not all dogs or cats will show obvious signs

of a UTI, Dr. Forrester stresses. “Therefore, pets at risk for UTIs should be screened by their veterinarian,” she recommends. Several disorders, including bladder stones, diabetes mellitus, kidney disease, and others, put pets at increased risk for urinary problems.

To diagnose a UTI, your veterinarian will take a sample of your pet's urine and perform a urinalysis, an examination of urine that may point to an infection.

The next step is to perform a urine culture. This test is the “gold standard” for diagnosing a UTI, Dr. Forrester says. The culture can confirm infection and identify the bacteria causing the problem.

“A complete workup that reveals the source of the problem is best, especially in recurrent cases,” explains Dr. Jody Lulich, professor of internal medicine at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine.

Antibiotics remain the first line of defense against UTIs. Your veterinarian will prescribe medication to treat the infection. To be sure the infection has been eradicated, a urine culture should be repeated

after completing veterinary treatment, Dr. Forrester advises.

SAFEGUARDING YOUR PET'S HEALTH

Once you have eliminated the problem, consider the adage that “a good offense is the best defense.” Your veterinarian can provide specific guidelines to help your dog or cat stay healthy and UTI free. Here are some tips to get you started:

- **Provide plenty of water.** To encourage your pet to drink more water, keep her water fresh, clean, and available 24 hours a day.
- **Evaluate your pet's diet** and make adjustments based on your veterinarian's recommendations.
- **Grant easy access to your cat's litterbox,** and keep it clean. Add additional litterboxes for multicat households, ideally one more litterbox than the number of cats in your home.

- **Exercise and walk your dog regularly** to encourage her to urinate frequently, which may help reduce the risk of infection.

Keeping your pet's environment clean and maintaining her appropriate weight can also prove helpful in preventing UTIs, suggests Dr. Lulich. Pay attention to changes in your pet's daily routine and urinary habits, which may warrant a visit to your veterinarian. Catching a urinary tract problem early will help alleviate pain and may prevent an easily treated infection from becoming a serious health concern.

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Susan Easterly is an award-winning pet writer in Oregon. She shares her home with a houseful of dogs and cats, who proofread all her stories.

“A urinary tract infection should be treated early to prevent other, more serious problems.”