

My Pet Has Diabetes

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My Pet Has Diabetes, Where Do I Start?

Hearing that your pet has diabetes can be scary, but just know that with proper management your pet can continue to live their best life. The best way to help your pet is to educate yourself.

What is Diabetes?

Diabetes occurs when the level of sugar (glucose) in the body becomes too high and unregulated due to low insulin production. Insulin is hormone that allows sugar to be broken down by the body and used for fuel. Without enough insulin, the sugar remains in the bloodstream and cannot be used for fuel. This causes the body to use alternate sources of energy such as fat and muscle.

When this occurs, we see weight and muscle loss, poor hair coat, weakness, and increased thirst and urination. Over time, if this goes untreated, the body's internal organs start to fail. Sugar in the pet's urine is a great energy source for bacteria, leading to increased urinary tract infections. Diabetic dogs can also become blind due to sugar in the lens leading to cataracts.

How is Diabetes Diagnosed?

A veterinary nurse will gather information regarding the symptoms you have been seeing and will obtain blood and urine samples. The veterinarian will conduct a thorough physical exam. A combination of symptoms, exam findings, and laboratory results will be used to make the diagnosis as well as rule out associated medical conditions such as urinary tract infections, high blood pressure, and kidney disease.

How is Diabetes Treated?

Dogs are insulin dependent, meaning if they are diagnosed with diabetes, they need insulin. Cats can sometimes be managed with diet changes and other lifestyle corrections, but in general, they do much better with insulin as well. Insulin is given by subcutaneous injection twice daily, as close to 12 hours apart as possible. This sounds scary, but most pets handle injections far better than pilling. A trained technician will demonstrate the technique and make sure you are comfortable with everything before you go home. Insulin is stored in the refrigerator and is good for up to 6 months if stored properly.

There are many different types of insulin available to treat our pets. Your veterinarian will choose the best brand and type based on whether you have a dog or cat, your needs, and your pet's other medical conditions. It is very important to follow advice regarding the exact type of insulin, the type of needles and syringes, and the dose prescribed.

Lifestyle changes do help. If your pet is overweight, please discuss a good diet plan with us. This will go a long way to helping manage the disease. Regular exercise and staying on a schedule helps as well. You will need to feed your pet regular meals, as insulin is best administered directly after a meal. If your pet is used to having free-choice food available all the time, we will need to transition them to twice daily meals. Healthy, low-carb snacks are fine to give inbetween meals. Please ask for specific advice.

Following our advice regarding treatment of any additional medical conditions your pet has (such as dental disease) will improve your pet's response to diabetes treatment.

Monitoring

If you or someone you know has diabetes, you are likely familiar with various monitoring techniques. The goal with our pets is very different than the goal with people. People are expected to live with diabetes sometimes for many decades, so very tight control of blood sugar is typically the goal. For our pets, diabetes is typically a disease of older pets, and we are looking at management for a few years. Because of this, our goal is to keep our pets happy and comfortable, controlling symptoms and keeping the blood sugar within a "reasonable" range.

We will monitor a variety of things when assessing how your pet is doing. This includes their weight, appetite, energy level, and laboratory testing. We will put this information together to determine if the dose of insulin is appropriate or a change needs to be made.

Each pet gets a customized monitoring plan based on your and your pet's needs. A variety of methods can be used, including "spot tests" done in the clinic, an all-day test, as well as various home monitoring systems. Our favorite system is called the Freestyle Libre, which is a quarter-sized device your pet can wear on their skin for up to 2 weeks, giving us "real time" data anytime we want it.

What Do I Watch For?

It is very important to inform us if your pet isn't eating or is vomiting or having diarrhea. These things can affect their needed dose of insulin. If we are closed or not available, and your pet is acting sick, it is important to skip the dose of insulin and seek emergency care.

Some signs that the blood sugar is either very high or very low include: shaking, weakness, acting "drunk", seizures, or vomiting and diarrhea. It is important to seek immediate emergency care at this point.

The Bottom Line

With great care, many pets can lead a happy and normal life with diabetes. It will take some work, and you will make mistakes as well as learn quite a bit. But we are here to help!