



LOSS OF APPETITE *in* SENIOR CATS

.....Symptoms, Causes, and Treatments

Mirtazapine is an antidepressant commonly used for people; and it turns out, also possesses appetite-stimulating properties—which is considered a side effect in humans. Mirtazapine was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) earlier this year to stimulate appetite in anorectic cats.

Mirataz® (mirtazapine transdermal ointment) is the first transdermal product to receive FDA approval for use in cats. And of course, that is a huge deal.

Often times, pilling cats is akin to non-compliance for many clients.

As cats are living longer lives, there are more geriatric cats than ever. Often geriatric cats seem to slowly lose their appetite, no longer want to eat at all, or become what's typically termed as "finicky" about their diet.

Of course, finicky cats are not typically being "finicky" just because they're cats, but because they're waving a red flag that something may be wrong.

In senior cats, other considerations should be made when addressing loss of

appetite. Perhaps the cat has renal disease, or osteoarthritis pain. Maybe there's another underlying medical condition—the possibilities are endless when inappetance is a symptom, and further diagnostics are required. Perhaps, the cat isn't eating because of a new therapeutic diet (which means the cat may not have been feeling well in the first place). Or maybe the decline in interest in food is occurring in response to medications the cat may be taking. Gone are the days of dismissing a decline in appetite as just a "finicky" cat.

An often overlooked consideration for diminished appetite is pain. If you're in pain, even a delicious meal like Christmas dinner may not be appealing. It's the same for cats.

Osteoarthritis should be always be considered when a cat stops eating. Osteoarthritis is a common radiographic finding in older cats, with a prevalence of up to 90 percent in appendicular joints.¹ When addressing loss of appetite, some veterinary professionals don't look for signs of pain, including asking simple lifestyle questions such as, "Has the cat stopped using stairs? Has the cat stopped jumping up on beds?

Is the cat showing an increase or decrease in grooming?" These can all be clues and possible pain indicators.

Of course, a far greater issue is clients who don't see the veterinarian because their cat seems well. Even cats in pain may effectively mask agony. At that point, the cat may have even lost weight from not eating, and an appetite stimulant that works quickly may be imperative as well as providing pain relief.

The non-profit Winn Feline Foundation funded the initial Mirtazapine studies led by researcher Jessica M Quimby, DVM, PhD, DACVIM.^{2,3} There's no question that a transdermal application in cats adverse to pills makes perfect sense. And appetite stimulation is so very important, especially in fragile geriatric patients. So, it may come as no surprise, that some suppliers want to continue compounding it themselves. There is clearly a market. However, the FDA isn't thrilled with that prospect. In fact, they've offered an uncharacteristic warning from a September 21 alert—which may have slid under the radar (*Box 1*).

FDA approved drugs have been

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BOX 1. FDA Statement on Compounded Formulations of Transdermal Mirtazapine

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration reminded veterinarians of the differences between Mirataz (mirtazapine transdermal ointment), an animal drug that the FDA approved in May 2018 with demonstrated safety and effectiveness to manage undesired weight loss in cats, compared to the use of compounded formulations of transdermal mirtazapine, which some veterinarians started prescribing before there was an FDA-approved product available. FDA approval of this drug means that veterinarians have an approved mirtazapine product with known safety, efficacy, and quality to provide to their patients rather than relying on the only previously available products that are compounded from bulk drug substances that are unapproved animal drugs.

Unlike FDA-approved Mirataz, compounded formulations of transdermal mirtazapine have not been reviewed by the FDA for safety or effectiveness and may vary in quality and potency. With many compounded transdermal drugs, the rate and degree of absorption are unknown and may vary to deliver too little or too much of the active ingredient, making treatment outcomes unpredictable.

Manufactured for Kindred Biosciences Inc., Mirataz is a prescription animal drug that is intended to be applied topically on the inner surface of the cat's ear once daily for 14 days. Mirataz must be prescribed by a licensed veterinarian because a trained professional is needed to correctly diagnose the cause of weight loss in cats and determine whether the drug is an appropriate treatment.

demonstrated to be safe and effective for their intended use and manufactured in a consistent manner. This is a huge deal compared to even presumably trusted compounders who may not be so consistent, and who don't answer directly to the FDA.

Here are the take-home messages:

- **Encourage twice annual veterinary visits for all cats, but to the best of your ability, insist on it for older cats.** It's impossible to catch changes in cats you're not seeing.



- **Ask about lifestyle changes.** Sometimes the client assumption is old age, when the cat may be in pain. A cat in chronic pain will likely exhibit a loss in appetite.
- **Ask about nutrition, not only what the cat is eating, but how much the cat is eating.** And, of course, note any difference in the patient's weight. Again, you can't weigh a cat you're not seeing (a challenge I'll address in a future column).

And remember, cats don't become "finicky" overnight without a reason. 

REFERENCES

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