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. 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. 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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ABOUT STEVE DALE

Steve Dale, CABC (certified animal behavior consultant) is co-editor of Decoding Your Dog (authored by members of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists) and is a contributor to many veterinary books including The Cat: Clinical Medicine and Management (edited Dr. Susan Little and Treatment and Care of the Geriatric Veterinary Patient (edited Dr. Mary Gardner and Dr. Dani McVety). He’s a columnist for Veterinary Practice News and Pet Vet Magazine, and a contributing editor at CATSTER. He is host of two national radio shows, and is heard on WGN radio, Chicago. He serves on the Board of Directors of the Winn Feline Foundation and Human Animal Bond Association. And he speaks at conferences around the world. Among his many honors the AVMA Humane Award and he’s in the Dog Writer’s Association Hall of Fame. His blog is www.stevedale.tv.