



# Understanding feline asthma & its causes

Asthma is a common condition in humans but did you know that cats can suffer from it too? Emily Fowler finds out more about how it effects our feline friends

BY EMILY FOWLER

If you're one of the millions of people with asthma in the UK (about one in eleven of us are<sup>1</sup>), you'll have some idea of how a cat with untreated asthma might feel, because in many respects asthma in cats is very similar to asthma in humans. The respiratory disease causes constriction and inflammation of the small airways in the lungs, known as bronchoconstriction, causing coughing, wheezing and difficulty breathing.

## What causes feline asthma?

Dr Andy Sparkes, one of the world's leading feline vets and Veterinary Director at the charity International Cat Care, explained that some cats might be more susceptible: "Studies do suggest that some cats are more frequently affected with asthma - particularly Siamese and Oriental Shorthair cats - many, but not all, studies have found that these cats are quite markedly over-represented. Typically the disease seems to affect young adult cats."

As in humans, it's believed that the underlying cause of asthma in cats is an allergic condition and that this allergy results in the muscle around a cat's airways contracting, triggering the bronchoconstriction and making it harder for the cat to breathe.

Irritants in the cat's environment (for example, smoke or dust) can also exacerbate the symptoms and Andy explained that it's extremely hard to identify the underlying cause of the



allergic response.

"In some cats the signs will be seasonal, which may suggest exposure to pollens, for example, that are triggering the response. In others though, the signs will occur all year round. Some cats may improve when the cat litter is changed or when they are kept out of certain rooms in the house or when an owner stops using certain aerosols or scents. This may suggest the cat has developed an allergy to these items or that these items were exacerbating an underlying allergy to something else."

## How feline asthma is diagnosed

The symptoms of feline asthma could also suggest other diseases, like chronic bronchitis, and there isn't a specific test for it, so making a definitive diagnosis isn't easy. If a cat is brought in with signs of asthma, a vet would generally run tests to rule out other issues first, for example a bacte-

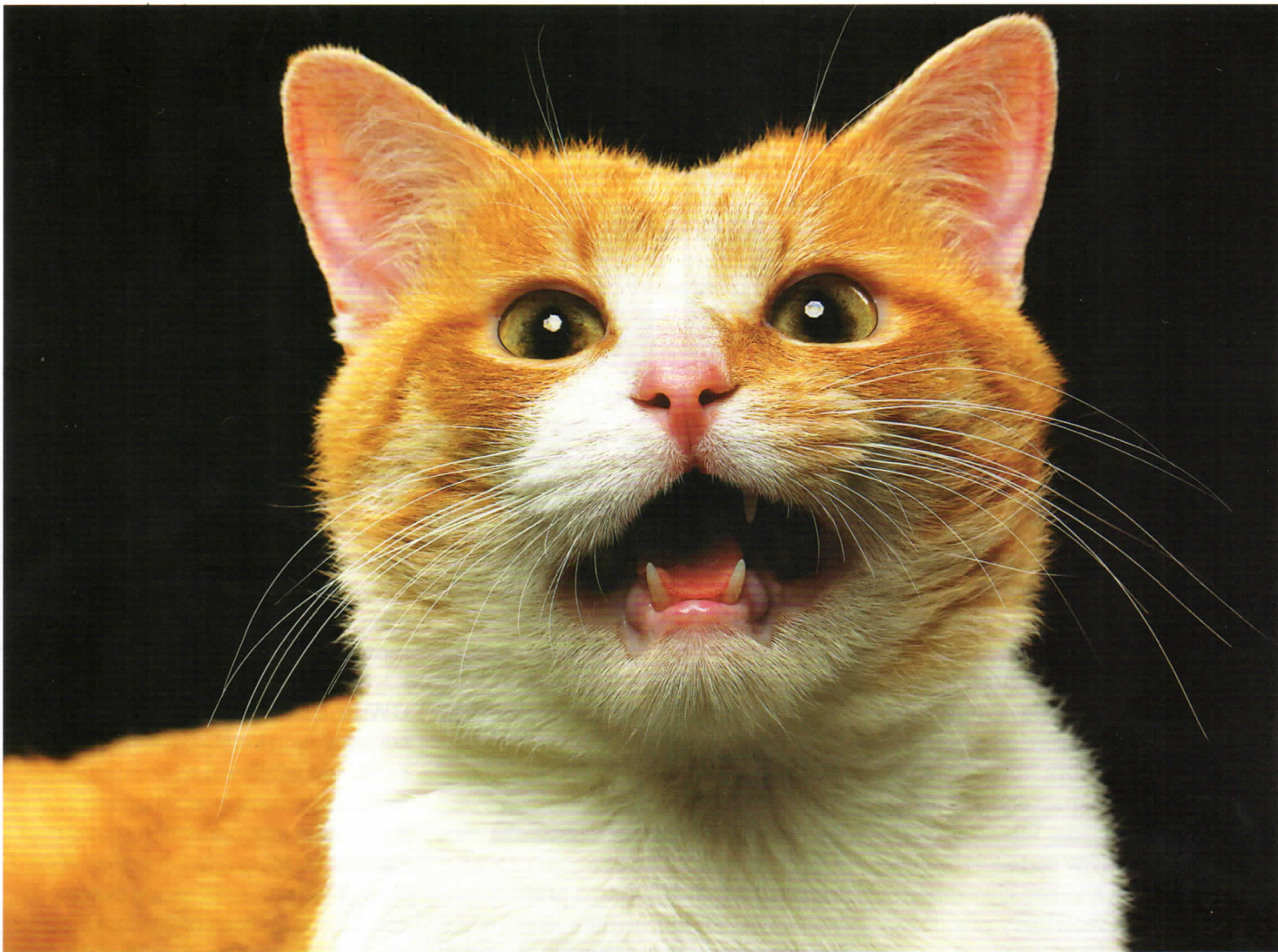
rial infection. Andy also explained: "Depending on where in the world the cat is, it may be important to rule out heartworm infection (that can cause signs identical to asthma) and perhaps lungworm infection."

Chest x-rays might be taken to look for any changes in the cat's airways, blood tests may be done and a sample of fluid might be taken from the cat's lungs, using a process called bronchial lavage, to check for the type and amount of inflammatory cells (in particular, a type called eosinophils) which could help to confirm an asthma diagnosis. A vet might also perform a bronchoscopy, where they pass a tiny camera into the lungs to examine the small airways more closely.

While a conclusive diagnosis of feline asthma isn't easy to provide, a combination of a cat presenting with the common symptoms of asthma, other diseases being ruled out and a good response to asthma treatment, is enough to indicate that asthma is extremely likely. When a doctor suspects a human has asthma, they'd test the patient's lung function before and after asthma treatment to support the diagnosis - but attempting that kind of test on a cat wouldn't be that easy!

## Treatment of feline asthma

Treatment for cats with suspected asthma is used to control the inflammatory response in the lungs that causes symptoms and also prevent any long-



term damage to the lungs. Medication in the form of corticosteroids are used to reduce inflammation and can be given as tablets, injections or even inhaled using a 'spacer' device with a mask, the type that's used in human babies and young children.

Inhaling the steroid is usually preferred as it takes it directly to the lungs and you might be surprised to hear that most cats will actually tolerate using a spacer very well! Most cats with asthma show a quick and obvious improvement when steroids are started, which also makes it easier to confirm the initial diagnosis.

Bronchodilators are another type of medication that can be used alongside steroids, particularly if a cat is experiencing severe attacks, relaxing the muscles around the small airways and opening them up, making it easy for the cat to breathe. I asked Andy what

owners can do, on top of veterinary treatment, to ease the symptoms and prevent attacks if their cat is diagnosed with asthma.

"When asthma is diagnosed or suspected, although it is often difficult to find the underlying cause, it is worthwhile looking carefully at the environment. Avoiding dusty or smoky environments is important and it is best for cat owners to avoid using aerosol sprays as far as possible. Changing the cat litter (especially if it is dusty or scented) may help and it may be best to remove room-scenting devices such as diffusers.

If the problem is suspected to be indoors, then allowing the cat out more or restricting access to some parts of the house may help. It can be helpful to keep a diary of the cat's clinical signs to try to work out when they are most severe and what, if anything, can be

identified that might trigger it."

### **The long-term prognosis**

Just like in humans, feline asthma is usually easily controlled with the right medication and an owner who takes into account environmental triggers. It's important that any signs of possible asthma aren't ignored, however, because the disease can cause permanent lung damage if left untreated and a severe attack could prove fatal.

<sup>1</sup>**CATLINK:** [www.asthma.org.uk/about/media/facts-and-statistics/](http://www.asthma.org.uk/about/media/facts-and-statistics/)

### **Common symptoms of feline asthma**

Persistent coughing  
Wheezing or noisy breathing  
Difficulty breathing  
Fast breathing