

Management of feline lower urinary tract disease: FLUTD

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Francesca Riccomini BSc(Hons), BVetMed, MRCVS, DAS(CABC), CCAB, on why cats suffer from FLUTD and a behavioural approach to management

THE term FLUTD covers a range of conditions that affect the bladder and urethra in cats. It is generally only diagnosed as a result of behavioral changes. Indeed, sometimes it is simply because an owner has an irritating or inconvenient problem with a pet's behaviour, such as indoor urination in various places, that the condition comes to veterinary attention. Once highlighted, investigations to rule out or treat any underlying medical cause, such as bladder stones, bacterial infection or neoplasia, must be urgently undertaken, particularly in males where the risk of obstruction may be high.

However, although estimates suggest an annual incidence of around one per cent of the population, many FLUTD cases are idiopathic – no actual cause can be determined. Cats with feline idiopathic cystitis (FIC) generally experience recurrent, self-limiting bouts when clinical signs are seen of no longer than 10 days' duration, followed by periods of relative normality. Fortunately, despite our limited understanding of the complex and multifactorial nature of this syndrome, the link between FIC and stress is now well established. [Table 1](#) lists some common clinical signs.

Our knowledge is growing in this area; however, some cats are so badly afflicted that their owners relinquish them or elect for euthanasia on welfare grounds. Therefore, any measures we can use to improve treatment success are to be welcomed and the behavioural approach can be particularly effective. Thus, it now forms an important aspect of the management of cats suffering from FLUTD, and, although opinion varies, a number of specific risk factors ([Table 2](#) and [3](#)) have been identified.

On examination of this list of risk factors, it is clear that owners can inadvertently contribute to the development of FIC. They are also instrumental in managing the condition, as their willingness to adapt their expectations and management regimes – especially those related to social and territorial stressors – is crucial in obtaining a successful outcome. They are also deserving of sympathy, because living with house soiling and seeing a pet they love suffer is not easy.

Treating FLUTD

Once the condition has been diagnosed and any necessary surgery and infection control measures have been undertaken, both short and long-term management must begin. Increasing fluid intake is vital (*VN Times* 8:9) and this often necessitates a change from a dry diet to wet food and/or adding extra liquid. Analgesia is frequently required and treatment with glycosaminoglycans (GAGs) aimed at replacing defects in the GAG layer covering the bladder epithelium has gained acceptance. The use of tricyclic antidepressants, such as amitriptyline, has also been advocated, but reduction of stress is now considered to be the most important treatment option for cats suffering from FIC.

Reducing stress – the behavioural approach

There is no adequate substitute in FIC cases for a detailed discussion with owners about the conditions that their pet encounters at home. Because unrealistic expectations so often underlie feline stress-related behaviours, it is also essential to exercise judgement and not rely solely on an owner's interpretation of events, especially in multi-pet households.

Whenever possible, a home visit should be arranged or video footage viewed of everyday interactions, both with people and other animals, especially cats.

Feline communication is subtle and frequently misunderstood. Far too many people accept “the odd spat” – which may occur on a daily basis, at every mealtime for instance – as normal. In reality for most domestic cats, reaching the point of lashing out in active aggression indicates generally high arousal levels, which may be difficult to reduce under the environmental conditions. Often a labelled “aggressor” turns out to be the cat that is constantly harassed by conspecifics that use body language and staring as a means of intimidation and preventing it from accessing resources such as food, water, litter trays or cat flaps. Some individuals will be so fearful of returning to the house when owners are out that they are effectively stuck outside. Here they may also be denied access to necessary facilities because the environment is, in feline terms, barren, neighbouring cats are also intimidating or the location is busy and noisy.

As stress is a potent contributor to FIC, such conditions are highly significant, besides which (even without any concurrent behavioural or medical problem), cats that are struggling to cope deserve appropriate intervention.

Nonetheless, it is a mistake to assume that feline stress is only an issue in multi-cat or multi-pet

homes. Apart from the obvious factor of external environmental stressors – feline, human, canine or physical in nature – a single cat home may be significantly devoid of cat-friendly features.

If this is combined with busy household schedules and fluid social groupings that result in a complete lack of predictability, the pet is likely to feel completely out of control and stressed. This state may be aggravated by intense physical and emotional demands from people. Owners generally like to cuddle their cats; unfortunately, far fewer cats enjoy these interactions.

No escape

Evidently, all these situations are compounded when outdoor access is denied. Sadly, at the same time as indoor-only management and the desire to own groups of unrelated cats is increasing, modern design styles frequently mean that all incarcerated pets have available is an elegant, noisy, sterile world, where their natural behaviours and essential needs are simply not catered for.

When cats have been poorly socialised and are of an anxious or timid temperament, they are likely to suffer most as a result of the sort of close contact with people and other pets that well-meaning owners often impose. For example, changes in routines, the make up of the household, a home move or redecoration may have a mildly negative affect on animals better prepared for life, but may for the more timid precipitate stress related illness.

Unfortunately, the common human response to medical and behavioural problems that subsequently develop is too often either reassurance, which imposes even more undesired attention on a distressed cat, or punishment, and sometime even a combination of the two. Discordant feline personalities, poor provision of facilities, boredom, and owner-induced pressure contribute to an increasingly common recipe for feline stress.

Therefore, our approach to these cases frequently involves radically changing owners' attitudes, increasing their understanding of feline behaviour in general, and their pets' physical and emotional requirements in particular. Without their cooperation and hard work it is difficult to manage FIC, but by addressing the condition from a number of angles good results can often be achieved.

Environmental enrichment

Creating a stimulating environment is the starting point when dealing with many feline problem behaviours and our main weapon in the fight to resolve stress in our domestic cats. It has been covered in depth in previous issues of *VN Times* (8:6, 8 and 9). However, the essential issues in relation to FIC are:

- Tactical use of 3D space – accommodating all feline natural behaviours, particularly physical exercise, climbing, observing territorial changes, resting, sleeping.

- Plentiful provision of beds and hiding places – especially elevated, dark refuges.
- Provision of suitable toilet facilities (inside and out); readily accessible to every individual in a multi-cat home.
- Zealous hygiene regimes for litter trays and outdoor latrine sites – reluctance to use a soiled, inadequate, inappropriately sited toilet area can cause significant stress and precipitate FIC.
- Avoid putting room fragrances or odour eliminators in or near litter trays.
- Plentiful marking/scratching facilities – appropriately located throughout the home and garden, particularly where cats feel most vulnerable.
- Multiple, separate sets of resources, especially in multi-cat groups should be provided, with locations chosen to reflect the animals' tendencies. It is important to reduce tension and conflict by minimising the pressure for resources and close contact with each other.
- Meticulous attention to the need for constantly changing resources that entertain cats and encourage physical exercise, play and mental activity.
- Application of the basic principles to the outdoor environment as well as inside, bearing in mind even more effort is required for indooronly cats.
- Minimising stressful challenge from radical changes in the scent profile of the cat's core area. Commercial pheromone preparations – used in accordance with the manufacturers' recommendations, and carefully targeted to areas where their best effects will be achieved – are a useful adjunct to any stress reduction programme. The pet's own scents can, however, often be used when finances are an issue.
- Adopting measures to reduce noise stress in modern homes where soft furnishings are lacking and fashionable hard surfaces predispose to amplified sounds and echoes.

Making changes

For many owners being told that cuddling is no longer an option is a significant psychological loss, so tact is required when highlighting the need for change in expectations and the way people interact with their cats. Getting them to abandon punishment is generally quite easy, but reassurance of anxious pets can be more tricky.

Providing other outlets, such as experimenting with new menus to increase water intake and finding toys that appeal to their cats can work well in fulfilling the human need to nurture. Besides, when clients discipline themselves not to impose unwanted attention on their pets, they often

discover that cats are willing to spend more time in their vicinity, even choosing to be nearer them more often than before. Evidently, there is a lot to consider when managing FLUTD. The behavioural approach offers us a great deal in our quest to reduce stress levels of affected cats and their owners.

Unfortunately, sometimes resolution and long-term management prove impossible. However, by working with clients to appropriately address the negative effects of current environmental and social conditions, and helping them to deal sensitively and well when their cats encounter life stressors in future, we can make a valuable contribution to the welfare of our patients.



The inability to escape from other individuals, be they feline, canine or human, because of locked cat flaps or indoor-only lifestyles is a potent source of stress for many cats.



Never predictable... cats can be choosy about where they drink from; therefore, some experiment may be necessary to find the preferred container.



In multi-cat homes owners often need to be proactive in providing suitable bolt-holes for the more timid members.



Cats that suffer from FLUTD can be those that don't drink enough, therefore, encouraging fluid intake is essential.

- Straining/repeated attempts/painful/difficult urination – dysuria.
- Passing frequent, small amounts of urine – pollakiuria.
- Haematuria.
- Agitation, distress and failure to settle.
- Urination in inappropriate (often multiple) locations because pain becomes associated with one latrine site after another – periuria.
- Less overt but equally significant signs include, for instance, cats that over groom their bellies and medial thighs. Animals showing these signs of psychogenic alopecia should always be investigated for FLUTD.

TABLE 1. Clinical signs of FLUTD

- Black and white
- Persian
- Middle-aged
- Overweight
- Indolent
- Kept indoors full time
- Fed a dry diet
- Inclined to drink insufficient fluid
- Residents of multi-cat homes
- Anxious personalities
- Poorly socialised
- Individuals that internalise stress and emotional tension

TABLE 2. Cats most at risk of developing FIC

- House move, renovation, redecoration.
- Social change, for example:
 - new partner, baby, cat or dog;
 - loss of favoured person or pet to which the individual was well bonded; and
 - significant change in household routines.
- Rainy and/or windy weather.
- Environmental stressors, for example, barren outdoor space, especially if there is a lack of suitable toilet sites; building work; fireworks; unpleasant neighbours; high local feline population; dogs living in the vicinity.
- Unattractive and/or insufficient toilet facilities – inside or outside.
- Change of litter type.
- Inappropriate choice/change of litter tray design.
- Poor litter tray hygiene/"offensive" cleaning methods, for example strong disinfectants and/or odour eliminator use.

TABLE 3. Additional risk factors