



Burmese Cats

Developing A Wellness Plan

By Dr. Hans Andersen

Burmese are deservedly one of the most popular cat breeds in New Zealand.

Physically robust and with a glossy short coat, they embody feline elegance. The blend of a very affectionate nature with an active outdoor-loving cat fits well with our suburban lifestyles.

Amongst purebred cats, Burmese are susceptible to relatively few health conditions but there are some to be aware of. Their impact can be minimised by dietary management and early detection by screening.

The most common disorders are sugar diabetes (diabetes mellitus, DM) and elbow osteoarthritis. Less common are hypokalaemic polymyopathy, a range of rare eye problems, and feline orofacial pain syndrome. Some diseases that may be more common in Burmese, e.g. FIV infections, parasitism, and periodontal disease, may be a consequence of their lifestyles.

The Most Common Disorders Diabetes Mellitus (DM)

There are two types of DM. In Type I the cells in the pancreas that produce insulin die. Insulin is the hormone that controls the level of sugar in the blood.

Cats with Type I DM are dependent on daily or twice daily injections of insulin life-long.

Type II DM is far more common in cats than Type I. In this form, the secretion or action of insulin is (usually) reversibly suppressed.

Burmese cats in New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom have a particularly high incidence of DM, about one in every 50 cats. Oddly, Burmese cats in the United States have no greater risk than the general population, about one in 200.

Just as in humans, lower physical activity and increasing obesity are important risk factors for Type II DM. So too are dental disease, chronic medical problems and prolonged treatment with corticosteroids. DM is more common in ageing cats.

The signs of DM are increased drinking, eating and weight loss. The high levels of sugar in the blood and urine predispose affected cats to abscesses and urinary tract infections, so these can be the trigger for a diagnosis. At a late stage in the disease cats will collapse with diabetic ketoacidosis, a severe and life-threatening complication that needs very intensive treatment.

Treatment of Type II DM is quite successful and many cats can be cured with a combination of a special slow-release insulin (glargine) and low glycaemic index (GI) foods. Steady weight reduction and increased activity are important in overweight cats. Unfortunately a few cats will need daily insulin injections for the rest of their lives.

Clearly, keeping your Burmese cat lean and active, feeding a low GI food (ask your veterinary team) and maintaining



Getti, owned by Lynette and Paul Barter, surveys his garden.

good dental health are important. It is worth screening for DM in Burmese annually from five years of age, and six-monthly from seven years. The most useful are urine tests and a blood test for levels of fructosamine. This is a protein that indicates levels of blood sugar over the previous four weeks.

Elbow Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis has been somewhat ignored in cats in the past. The signs are often more subtle in cats than in dogs, in which changes in a daily supervised exercise routine are readily seen. The absence of safe and effective treatments in the past meant there was less drive to investigate osteoarthritis signs further.

Osteoarthritis is common in older cats, with estimates ranging from 30 percent showing clinical signs through to 90 percent having radiographic

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(X-ray) signs. Burmese cats appear to have a particularly high incidence of osteoarthritis affecting the elbows. It is not clear whether this is a genuine inherited condition or a consequence of lifestyle factors.

Affected cats walk with their elbows held out a little from their chests, and may be more reluctant to jump down than up. They will resent full flexion or extension of their elbow joints.

Treatment involves getting them to a lean body condition, nutraceuticals such as glucosamine, chondroitin, green-

lipped mussel extract and omega 3 fatty acids, and using a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug safe for prolonged use in cats.

Lifestyle diseases

Burmese cats are often quite territorially assertive and this often gets them into more fights. Males (surprise!) are more involved than females. This increases the risk of infection with FIV, the cat AIDS virus, predisposing the cat to many health problems.

Vaccination against FIV is likely to be effective protection. It is important that



Wellness Plan for Life

2 - 3 months

F3 or F4 plus FIV vaccination, microchip, worming and flea control programme, kitten kindy, nutritional advice.

3 - 5 months

De-sex, screen for problems with eyes and erupting teeth.

8 - 12 months

Dental check and change from kitten to adult feeding regime.

15 months

F3 or F4 plus FIV booster vaccination, dental health check, adjust parasite prevention programme depending on hunting behaviour. If dentistry is needed, do pre-anaesthetic/baseline blood and urine tests.

2 - 5 years

Annual health checks, booster vaccinations depending on boarding and territorial exposure.

5 - 7 years

Annual health checks, wellness screening tests, vaccination boosters as appropriate.

7 years +

Six-monthly health checks and screening tests. These may now extend to include blood pressure, cardiac ultrasound or X-rays.

Further testing and diet change according to findings.



“Microchipping is highly recommended for Burmese.”

all FIV vaccinated cats are microchipped because they will test positive for FIV once vaccinated.

Microchipping is highly recommended for Burmese. Their friendly nature has them follow school children home or climb into strange cars. They can end up a long way from home.

Many Burmese are avid hunters and this means they need to be wormed every three months with a comprehensive wormer. Cats infected with lungworm may develop a deep chesty cough resembling vomiting. This needs treatment by your vet.

Periodontal disease appears, anecdotally, to be more common in Burmese cats. This may be an effect of line-breeding, of exposure to more calicivirus or oral pathogens as kittens in a breeding cattery, or to diets they are fed as adults.

The gold standard of periodontal disease prevention and management is daily brushing with an enzyme-based toothpaste. Regular chewing of bones, gristly meat and biscuits formulated to manage periodontal disease all help. Some cats need oral antiseptic rinses or antibiotics.

Annual dental checks are very important, with affected cats being checked every three to six months.