



FELINE COGNITIVE DYSFUNCTION SYNDROME

Pet cats are now living longer lives, thanks to advancements in nutrition and veterinary medicine in recent years. Cats aged 11-14 years are termed “senior”, and cats 15 years and over are “super-seniors”! Whilst living to enjoy old age is great, there are unfortunately several health issues associated with these older life-stages.

COGNITIVE DYSFUNCTION SYNDROME

Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CDS) occurs when there is a decline in cognitive abilities, such as **learning, memory, attention, and spatial awareness**. This is a result of ageing changes in the brain, and may also be referred to as “**senility**” or “**dementia**” as with humans.

CDS is characterised by behavioural changes, but it is important to be aware that these behavioural changes can also result from other diseases such as **hyperthyroidism, chronic kidney disease, and diabetes** to name a few – all of which are also seen frequently in older cats. If you notice any behavioural changes in your cat, it is therefore very important to book an appointment with your vet to rule out potential causes. CDS is a diagnosis of exclusion – therefore other diseases need to be ruled out first.

SIGNS OF COGNITIVE DYSFUNCTION SYNDROME

The following behavioural signs may be seen in cats with CDS:

- **SPACIAL DISORIENTATION** (confusion about where they are) - e.g. becoming trapped in corners; forgetting the location of the litter tray etc.
- **TEMPORAL DISORIENTATION** (confusion about what time it is) - e.g. forgetting that feeding time has just occurred.
- **CHANGES IN SLEEP-WAKE CYCLES** – e.g. the cat is awake when they would normally be sleeping and vice versa.
- **HOUSE SOILING** – inappropriate urination and/or defaecation.
- **INAPPROPRIATE VOCALISATION** – e.g. loud crying at night (“**night-howling**”).
- **ALTERED INTERACTION / RELATIONSHIPS WITH OWNERS and/or OTHER PETS** in the household – e.g. increased attention seeking; increased aggression.
- **ALTERED INTEREST IN FOOD** – e.g. increased, or more commonly, decreased appetite.

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- **DECREASED GROOMING**
- **CHANGES IN GENERAL BEHAVIOUR** – e.g. increased irritability; increased anxiety; decreased responsiveness.
- **CHANGES IN LEARNING AND MEMORY** – e.g. forgetting commands; forgetting previous litter training.
- **CHANGES IN ACTIVITY** – e.g. reduced activity; aimless wandering or pacing.

TREATMENT OF COGNITIVE DYSFUNCTION SYNDROME

Sadly CDS cannot be cured, however the associated signs of the disease can be reduced with suitable management such as **environmental enrichment and special diets and supplements**.

There are currently no medications licensed for the treatment of CDS in cats, however some cases may be successfully managed with the use of **anxiolytic (anti-anxiety) and anti-depressant medications**.

DIETARY MANAGEMENT

Diets enriched with **anti-oxidants** and other supportive compounds such as **vitamin E, L-carnitine, beta-carotene and omega-3 fatty acids**, are believed to improve cognitive function. A special prescription diet may be available, or supplements (nutraceuticals) that are given to your cat in addition to their usual diet.

Dietary management should be used alongside environmental enrichment strategies (see below).

ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT

Try enhancing your cat's environment with **extra toys**; increasing your **time spent with your cat** (if they enjoy human company); increasing your **interaction with the cat** through play; providing **hiding places**; **elevated sites** that are easily accessible (using ramps or steps etc); and providing **puzzle feeders**. Puzzle feeders are either stationary or mobile objects which hold your cat's food, and must be manipulated to release this food, providing a fun "brain-teaser" for your cat. If your cat has never used puzzle feeders before, introduce them gradually and start with easy ones. Puzzle feeders may be bought commercially or hand-made at home such as using simple egg cartons. See foodpuzzlesforcats.com for some great tips and ideas.

Environmental enrichment provides mental stimulation, an increase in the growth and survival of nerve cells in the brain, and an increase in cognitive function. Ensure changes to your cat's environment are introduced gradually so as not to confuse them.

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Other environmental adjustments that can make your elderly cat's life easier include:

- **Avoid placing food and water on high surfaces** that may be difficult to access, or provide a ramp or steps up to the surface.
- **Raise food and water bowls** up slightly from the floor to make it easier to reach, especially if your cat is arthritic. Ensure food and water bowls are kept separate.
- Provide several **comfortable beds** in easily accessible areas – consider heated beds for added comfort.
- Provide **large low-sided litter trays** for easy access, and place in easily accessible locations.
- Use **soft sandy-type litter** which is softer on the paws.
- **Elderly cats may find it more difficult to use cat-flaps** and may need letting in and out via a door.
- Allow elderly cats to have **peace and quiet** away from other pets and household members when they want it.
- **Avoid introducing new cats or dogs** as this can be very stressful for an elderly cat.
- Using a synthetic copy of the **Feline Facial Pheromone** (e.g. *Feliway Classic*), can help reduce anxiety in cats with CDS.

SEVERE COGNITIVE DYSFUNCTION SYNDROME

For cats that have developed many signs of CDS, indicating that their cognitive abilities have declined severely, changes to their environment can unfortunately make things worse for them, as these cats will have a reduced coping ability and will likely become more stressed. Therefore cats with severe CDS should have environmental changes kept to a minimum or avoided altogether, and some of these cats may actually benefit from having their area reduced, such as providing a single room with all their key resources nearby (sleeping, eating, drinking, toileting areas etc), so they can feel safe and secure.



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