

Living with diabetes in the family

Diabetes affects all members of the family, not just the individual suffering with the disease. Even when the patient is stable on medication, one tends to watch him like a hawk for any uncharacteristic behaviour that could indicate that something is amiss. Untreated sores could potentially become infected, lethargy could indicate hypoglycaemia, and lack of appetite any number of problems. And there is the constant niggler at the back of one's mind about possible long-term organ damage.

Having a diabetic in the home also tends to put a dampener on one's social life. Several years ago, one of my boys became diabetic and needed insulin twice a day at mealtimes – insulin glargine at 7 am and 7 pm. This meant if I had a dinner date, I could only leave home after 7 pm. If I had an afternoon/evening function, I had to be back in time for the evening insulin injection. Going away for a weekend was difficult because most house-sitters won't give insulin injections as part of their service. Once, when spending the weekend at a nearby hotel, I rushed home at 7 am to give him the injection and then went back for a leisurely breakfast!

Type 2 diabetes seems to be relatively common in cats and dogs and can be triggered by many things. In our case, it may have been related to the stress of being trapped and put into an animal rescue organisation, together with the fact that Biggles had been homeless for some time preceding this. Also, he was about 10 years old at the time of diagnosis. The first indications were weight loss and increased drinking and urination, together with a dry, dull coat.

Once Biggles was put onto insulin his condition rapidly improved and we settled into a routine of a commercial high-protein, reduced

fat diet and the twice-daily insulin injections. I soon discovered that the easiest way to inject him was to wait until he was eating and his attention was diverted from what I was doing. He then didn't mind me gently lifting the skin on the back of his neck and giving him the subcutaneous injection. He was an extremely good patient.

Blood sugar is monitored in animals in the same way as in humans but because Biggles was so stressed at the vet, this could have affected his glucose reading. So a twice-yearly fructosamine test was the easiest and least disruptive way to monitor his blood sugar levels. The blood sample is done in the laboratory and the fructosamine value reflects the average glucose levels over the past fortnight.

This routine went on for three or more years until I gradually became aware that Biggles was becoming less active and more lethargic than he had been. One Sunday he was really subdued and seemed to be in pain, so I rushed him to the vet. On hearing that he was diabetic, the vet immediately tested his glucose levels and found them drastically low, bordering on a diabetic coma.

A syringe of glucose administered orally and an infusion of glucose pushed up his blood sugar levels, but by the next day, they had dropped way down again. The vet was baffled, so a battery of tests was ordered, but nothing else seemed to be amiss (except a bit of cervical arthritis). He was then taken off all insulin and diabetic food and we monitored his glucose levels daily. Fortunately they slowly rose over the next week and when we retested six months later, the level was still within the normal range.

Biggles is now off insulin completely and

Biggles



eats normal cat food. He is doing very well and has regained his sparkle and zest for life. There is no obvious reason why his diabetes has disappeared, but apparently this is a phenomenon that has been known to occur in cats particularly.

We of course are delighted that our boy is normal again. We no longer have to worry about every cut or scratch becoming infected, he doesn't have to be kept calm, and the long-term damage to kidneys and other organs of the body is hopefully lessened. I am sure Biggles is also very pleased that we are no longer using his neck as a pincushion, but otherwise he seems oblivious to the worry and anxiety his disease has caused us.

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