

Brenda takes care of Tabitha, her seven year old tabby cat. Tabitha has lived with Brenda for a little over two years and, previous to that time, she was a street roamer. Brenda adopted her from a private rescue organization in Portland, Oregon and has enjoyed her companionship ever since. Tabitha lives indoors and is fed dry food only. She has had zero health problems in her two years with Brenda, but currently she is coughing.

Actually, Brenda is not sure whether Tabitha is coughing or gagging like she is trying to vomit. Initially Brenda was pretty sure Tabitha was trying to vomit up a hair ball and was given some hair ball preventative medication from her veterinarian's office. The treatment initially seemed to eliminate the problem but after about two weeks of treatment, the symptoms returned. Brenda thinks now that Tabitha may be coughing more than gagging and the frequency and duration of these episodes has increased. Tabitha's appetite and overall attitude seem to be unchanged, although Brenda thinks she seems more reclusive lately.

Sometimes it can be hard to distinguish coughing versus gagging versus retching. In fact, they may all be occurring concurrently depending on what might be the underlying cause. And of course, we all know that is what we must discover-the underlying cause.

It is my opinion that Tabitha is coughing. One might inquire as to how I arrived at said opinion, and I must confess I did so based on experience with other patients and, too, the season of the year. More on that in a minute.

Tabitha's coughing indicates, as does most coughing, that there is an insult to her respiratory tract. There can be many causes and there is not enough space here, in fact there is not enough space in this entire paper, especially a Tuesday edition, to allow for proper discussion of all potential causes. Let's go with one, feline asthma.

Feline asthma is a bronchial disease which results from the cat's immune system reacting to something that has been inhaled into the breathing tubes or bronchioles. This reaction is inflammatory in nature and can cause narrowing of the bronchial tubes. This can lead to coughing and, with progression, quite serious constriction of the tubes to the point where some of these patients can not breathe effectively. Let untreated these severe cases can lead to respiratory arrest and death. Tabitha is not to that point, but the disease can be progressive. In fact, it is very similar to asthma in humans.

It is thought that feline asthma has an allergic component to its etiology, something in the air that the cat's immune system is ultra sensitive in responding against. When exposed, the asthma signs ensue, coughing being a hallmark symptom.

Diagnosis of asthma involves radiographs of the lungs which will demonstrate prominence of the bronchial tubes. There can be infectious causes of bronchitis that can also cause a similar pattern on the chest films, and in fact, there can be secondary infections involved in cases of primary feline asthma. To diagnose definitively the cause of the bronchitis, we collect small wash samples from the bronchial tubes and examine them microscopically.

Treatment for feline asthma involves muting the hyper active immune response using corticosteroids such as prednisone. In the cases that involve secondary bacterial infections, we also treat with appropriate antibiotics. Some cats will tolerate inhaled therapy for asthma, which can be quite effective. The prognosis with treatment is good; however, we do not cure this condition. As in humans, it is treated as episodes occur.

Recall above that I mentioned in Tabitha's case that the season of the year is right for asthma. Those of you who suffer from this disease will relate that this time of year asthma episodes are much more frequent. The same holds true for cats, owing I suspect to the increased amount of allergens in the air.