

WEIGHT LOSS AND CACHEXIA

BASICS

OVERVIEW

- Weight loss is considered clinically important when it exceeds 10% of the normal body weight and is not associated with fluid loss
- “Cachexia” is defined as a general physical wasting and malnutrition characterized by extreme weight loss, muscle wasting, lack of appetite (known as “anorexia”), and general debilitation that is associated with long-term (chronic) disease or inflammation

SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION of ANIMAL

Species

- Dogs and cats

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES in the ANIMAL

- Clinical signs of particular diagnostic value in patients with weight loss are whether the appetite is normal, increased, decreased, or absent, and the presence or absence of fever or other signs of generalized (systemic) illness
- Historical information is extremely important—evaluate the type and quantity of diet being offered, the pet’s daily activity, environment, appetite, signs of gastrointestinal disease (such as vomiting, diarrhea, stool color/consistency, difficulty swallowing [known as “dysphagia”])
- Signs associated with an underlying disease

CAUSES

Dietary Causes

- Insufficient quantity of food
- Poor quality of food
- Inedible food—decreased palatability
- Spoiled diets
- Diets that have lost nutrients because of prolonged storage
- Competition in a multi-pet household

Lack of Appetite (Anorexia)

- Pseudoanorexia or “false lack of appetite,” a condition in which the animal does not eat because it has difficulty grasping, chewing, and/or swallowing food
- Inability to smell, grasp, or chew food
- Difficulty swallowing (dysphagia)
- Regurgitation (return of food or other contents from the esophagus or stomach back up through the mouth)
- Vomiting

Disorders in which Nutrients Are Not Absorbed from the Intestines (Malabsorptive Disorders)

- Infiltrative and inflammatory bowel disease
- Lymphangiectasia—dilation of the lymphatic vessels in the gastrointestinal tract; the “gastrointestinal tract” includes the stomach, small intestines, and large intestines
- Severe intestinal parasitism

Disorders in which Nutrients Are Not Digested (Maldigestive Disorders)

- Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency—a syndrome caused by inadequate production and secretion of digestive enzymes by the pancreas

Metabolic Disorders

- Organ failure—heart failure, liver failure, and kidney failure
- Inadequate production of steroids by the adrenal glands (known as “hypoadrenocorticism” or “Addison’s disease”)
- Excessive production of thyroid hormone (known as “hyperthyroidism”), especially in cats
- Extreme weight loss and muscle wasting (cachexia) due to cancer

Excessive Nutrient Loss

- Protein-losing enteropathy—condition in which proteins are lost from the body through the intestines
- Protein-losing nephropathy—condition in which proteins are lost from the body through the kidneys
- Diabetes mellitus (“sugar diabetes”)
- Extensive skin lesions (such as burns)

Disease of the Nervous System and Muscles

- Disease of the nerves that connect the spinal cord and muscles (known as “lower motor neuron disease”)
- Central nervous system (brain, spinal cord) disease—usually associated with lack of appetite (anorexia) or the animal does not eat because it has difficulty grasping, chewing, and/or swallowing food (pseudoanorexia)

Excessive Use of Calories

- Increased physical activity
- Prolonged or extreme cold environment
- Excessive levels of thyroid hormone (hyperthyroidism)
- Pregnancy or lactation
- Increased breakdown of lean muscle mass and body tissues (known as “catabolism”)—fever, infection, inflammation, cancer

TREATMENT

HEALTH CARE

- The most important treatment principle is to treat the underlying cause of the weight loss
- Determine caloric requirements for the animal, taking into account activity level and severity of illness

DIET

- Must provide sufficient caloric nutrition in the form of adequate amounts of an appropriate, high-quality diet—fed in the form or manner that best allows patient utilization
- Patient may need to be fed by feeding tube or through intravenous feeding (known as “parenteral nutrition”)

SURGERY

- Placement of a feeding tube may be necessary

MEDICATIONS

- Depend on the underlying cause of the weight loss

FOLLOW-UP CARE

PATIENT MONITORING

- Depends on the underlying cause of the weight loss
- Patient should be weighed regularly and frequently
- Appetite and caloric intake should be monitored closely to ensure nutritional needs are being met

PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- Depend on the underlying cause of the weight loss

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Depend on the underlying cause of the weight loss

EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Depend on the underlying cause of the weight loss

KEY POINTS

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