

# TAKING A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO FLUTD

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**Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease (FLUTD) is a painful and sometimes life-threatening condition, often characterised by symptoms such as stranguria, haematuria and pollakiuria.** There are several possible underlying causes of FLUTD, the most common being is Feline Idiopathic Cystitis (FIC), accounting for around 60% of cases. Urinary stones (usually struvite or calcium oxalate) account for a further 20% of cases, followed by urethral plugs (15%)<sup>1</sup>. For all the main causes of FLUTD, studies have shown that the right nutrition, increasing water intake and environmental management, together as a holistic approach, are key to successful treatment<sup>2,3</sup>.

## Diagnosis

Although FIC is the most common cause of **FLUTD**, it requires a diagnosis of exclusion. Radiography of the entire urinary tract is important to rule out urethroliths and uretheroliths, while ultrasound can be helpful to visualise the bladder wall and rule out rare radiolucent stones. Furthermore, urinalysis is especially important in older cats, or cats with concurrent diseases, such as diabetes, to check for infection. This also allows identification of crystals, although it should be borne in mind that these will form over time and in some cases can be physiological<sup>4</sup>.

## Treating FLUTD

Once a diagnosis has been reached, a treatment plan can be put in place. Immediate treatment may include analgesia and antispasmodics, however long term and permanent treatment usually involves management of the home environment and the whole cat, not just the medical treatment of the urinary tract. This encompasses increasing water intake, environmental enrichment and making changes to the diet. Even though cases are rare, bacterial cystitis does occur, and may be difficult to differentiate from FIC. Antimicrobials may be prescribed, following culture and sensitivity, if the initial analgesia and antispasmodics do not have the desired effect<sup>5</sup>.

## Encouraging water intake

Increasing water intake reduces the overall risk of **FLUTD**. The more dilute the urine, the lower the risk of FIC, crystals and proteins forming stones or plugs. Although cats are reluctant drinkers, there are several things owners can do to encourage water intake. Providing wide bowls so that whiskers don't touch the edges can help, and many cats prefer glass or ceramic bowls to plastic- these are also less prone to bacterial growth with frequent cleaning. Having multiple bowls around the house, especially in a multi-cat household where territorial disputes may prevent access, is also beneficial. For some cats, a running water source such as a water fountain or dripping tap is preferable.



## Environmental management and enrichment

Stress, often caused by environmental factors, is a major risk factor for FIC. Common triggers include changes in routine or disputes with other cats in the household over territory or resources. This subject can be difficult to broach with owners. They can often feel guilty and may lack an understanding of cats' social behaviour. Taking a thorough history and carefully considering the owner's home and lifestyle is a good first step towards making beneficial changes to the environment.

Where possible, each household should contain the same number of resources (food and water bowls, beds, etc.) as cats, plus a spare of each to minimise the chances of conflict between cats. Providing high vantage points to survey the environment and safe hiding places can also help reduce stress. Good litter tray management- keeping it in a quiet place and cleaning it regularly- is another thing owners can do to help reduce stress<sup>6</sup>.

Cats need stimulation and activity, but it may not be possible or desirable in all cases for owners to let their cat outdoors, so providing lots of mental stimulation and play is important.

It can seem overwhelming to owners to make multiple changes at once and some might not be possible for every owner. A written plan that is adapted to them and their cat can be helpful to gain their trust and improve compliance<sup>7</sup>.

## Feeding a cat with FLUTD: how and what?

The right nutrition is important for cats with FLUTD. Cats often have strong food preferences and offering a mix of wet and dry food can be beneficial. Wet food helps to increase water intake, reducing urine specific gravity and increasing urine volume<sup>8</sup>. Dry food can also be beneficial as it can be left down for a longer time at room temperature, allowing cats who have a natural preference for multiple small meals to express this behaviour, which may reduce stress. It can be used in food dispenser toys, which is an effective way to provide environmental enrichment.

In cases where struvite stones are the cause of FLUTD, a prescription diet will help dissolve these and prevent formation of calcium oxalate stones once any pre-existing stones have been removed<sup>9</sup>. Cats with FIC also require a prescription diet- the calorie moderation is beneficial where increased weight is a risk factor and a precise sodium level can help encourage water intake.

## Conclusion

Taking a holistic approach is key to treating FLUTD. It can be challenging when there are many changes to be made to the home environment, however, getting an accurate diagnosis will help in prioritising these changes. By supporting and working closely with the owner to adapt their cat's home and diet, the risk of recurrence can be greatly reduced.



## References

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