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MEGACOLON

What is megacolon?

The gastrointestinal tract terminates in a tubular organ called the colon. The colon serves as a site for absorption of water and storage of fecal material. It is continuous with the rectum. The walls of the colon contain muscles that are stimulated to contract by nerves from the spinal cord. When the colon contracts, fecal material is pushed out of the body.

If the nerves to the colon do not function properly, the muscles of the colonic wall will not contract properly. If this happens, the muscles stretch and the colon enlarges in diameter. In addition, the fecal material is not moved out of the body and severe constipation may result. This massive enlargement of the colon and the resulting constipation is called megacolon. The colon may have a diameter 3-4 times that of a normal cat.

How does it occur?

An injury to the spinal cord can result in formation of megacolon. Also, mechanical obstruction caused by tumor, foreign bodies, hairballs, and strictures can lead to megacolon. However, in most cases, we cannot determine the reason that the nerves to the colon quit functioning. This disease generally occurs in middle-aged to older cats, but has also been seen in cats only 3-4 years old. Usually heavy or obese cats are affected.

How is it treated?

Usually, a medical approach is tried first, with surgery reserved for unresponsive cases. A medical approach involves the use of laxatives, stool softeners, colon wall stimulants, and high fiber diets. These do not correct the underlying cause, but they do allow fecal material to pass so the cat does not become constipated and ill.