

INTRODUCTION

Overall, in the UK, **chronic kidney disease (CKD)** is thought to affect 1% of patients registered to a veterinary practice at any one time. The frequency of **CKD** is much higher in older cats and is estimated to affect around 30% of cats over the age of 15 years.

This guide has been written to provide cat owners with the information they need to understand this complex condition and provide the best care for their cat. The author regularly lectures on this subject and the contents of this book reflect what she teaches to veterinary students, veterinary nurses, technicians and qualified veterinarians around the world.

Important Legal Information:

Cat Professional has developed this book with reasonable skill and care to provide general information on feline health and care in relation to kidney disease. This book however does not, and cannot, provide advice on any individual situation. It is not a substitute for advice from a veterinarian on each individual situation.

Cat Professional therefore strongly recommends that users seek, and follow, advice from their veterinarian on any health or other care concerns that they may have concerning their cats. Users should not take, or omit to take, action concerning the health or care of their cats in reliance on the information contained in this book and so far as permissible by law, Cat Professional excludes all liability and responsibility for the consequences of any such action or omission in reliance on that information. While this book does not provide advice on, or recommend treatments or medications for, individual situations, users attention is brought to the fact that some of the medications referred to in this book may not be licensed (veterinary approved) in all countries and therefore may not be available in all countries.



SECTION 1 | the emotional side of things

Receiving bad news: coping with the emotional side of receiving a diagnosis of kidney disease in your cat

Being told that your cat has kidney disease has probably come as a very nasty shock. You are likely to be on a roller-coaster of emotions with a lot of worry about your cat. This section will aim to reassure you as well as prepare you for what is to come.

My first advice is to stop, take a deep breath and try to remain calm. Take some time to understand and come to terms with the diagnosis and what it means for your cat. Don't rush any decisions. In most cases, all is not lost and there are lots of things that you can do to restore your cat's quality of life. Remember, you are likely to be suffering more than your cat!

What is wrong with my cat/what happens now?

Firstly, a diagnosis of **chronic kidney disease (CKD)** is not necessarily a death sentence! Although it is a progressive disease, with appropriate care and commitment you can help your cat to live a happy life – often for many years. Even in those severely affected cats needing hospital treatment and intravenous fluids, recovery to a good quality of life is possible. Don't immediately assume that your cat's life is over. However, **CKD** is a very serious condition – and all cases vary in the level of care that they need. Your veterinarian is in the best position to advise you on your own cat and what the future might hold – discuss your concerns with them. At the worst, if diagnosed in severe **CKD**, your veterinarian might advise you that **euthanasia** (putting your cat to sleep) is the kindest option rather than any treatment. Terrible though this is, this is only the case in the minority of cats with kidney disease.

A diagnosis of kidney disease means that your cat's kidneys are not working as effectively as they should be and this is why your cat has been feeling ill. **Section 2** covers the scientific aspects of this condition in much greater detail – you can read about the causes of kidney disease, how veterinarians diagnose the condition and how it can best be treated.

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What caused the kidney disease – was it my fault?

Many owners will immediately panic that they could have done more to prevent the illness from developing or that, if only they had taken their cat to the veterinarian sooner, things might be different. Although it is impossible to generalise and I cannot comment on your own cat's circumstances, in my experience:

- The overwhelming majority of cases of kidney disease are caused by medical conditions which are completely out of an owner's control i.e. your cat is not ill because of something you have done! There are a few very rare exceptions to this – one would include allowing your cat access to a **nephrotoxin** (a substance which is toxic to the kidneys). Examples of **nephrotoxins** include antifreeze (ethylene glycol), lilies, grapes and raisins. This is discussed in more detail in **Section 2**



Lilies are known to be poisonous to cats if eaten

- Although it is always advisable to take your cat to the veterinarian as soon as you realise it is ill, in most situations a short delay is unlikely to have changed their chances of recovery. Again there are some exceptions to this but they are rare – for example causes of sudden kidney problems like the example of eating lilies highlighted above. This can be a rapidly deteriorating condition and every second counts when it comes to treatment!

Cats are masters of hiding illness and, in most circumstances, we only realise our cats are ill when things have got really bad. Most of the signs of illness that a cat shows are also vague – such as sleeping more and slowly losing weight. These signs can be very gradual and hard to spot on a day to day basis. Don't punish

yourself for not realising that your cat is ill – you are not alone! Early diagnosis of kidney disease usually requires proactive steps from an owner and veterinarian – as will be discussed more in the section: [Can kidney disease be diagnosed before clinical signs are present?](#)

Is it possible to prevent kidney disease from occurring in my cat?

Unfortunately it is not possible to prevent kidney disease from occurring in the overwhelming majority of patients – the only examples would be to avoid contact with potential **nephrotoxins**. **Nephrotoxins** are discussed in more detail in [Section 2](#).

Since kidney disease is most common in older cats, it is advisable to monitor these cats more closely for evidence of kidney disease – this is especially important since cats are very good at hiding illness from us until it is very advanced. Early diagnosis of kidney disease is discussed in more detail in the section: [Can kidney disease be diagnosed before clinical signs are present?](#)

What is the treatment for this disease?

Treatment consists of:

1. Treating the cause of the kidney disease (where this can be found) – for example bacterial infections can be treated with antibiotics.
2. Helping the cat to cope with reduced kidney function. Depending on the individual cat and the severity of their disease this includes feeding a special diet, helping the cat to maintain a normal state of hydration (ie prevent dehydration) and using medication that helps to reduce vomiting, improve the appetite and so on.

Section 2 discusses this in greater detail – the treatment for kidney disease is complicated as normal kidneys perform many vital functions. In the first instance, your veterinarian may suggest that your cat is admitted to their hospital for intravenous fluid therapy (putting your cat on a drip). This is an effective treatment for dehydration which is common in **CKD** patients and often provides a significant ‘boost’ to affected cats. In most cases, the cat will not need to stay on a drip for more than a few days after which it can return home for treatment with you.

Is my cat in pain?

Kidney disease certainly makes a cat feel unwell but it is not usually a painful condition for the majority of cats. Exceptions would include some cats with kidney and/or bladder stones. Your veterinarian will be able to advise you whether or not your cat is in any pain or distress and what treatments are available to help this.

Is it fair to put my cat on lots of different medications – am I being cruel to treat it?

Not all cats with kidney disease need medication. Feeding a kidney prescription diet is usually the most important treatment. Further medication beyond this will depend on your cat and whether they need certain drugs. In some cases, cats with kidney disease do need lots of different medicines and the thought of giving these to your cat can be daunting. My advice, would be not to give up without trying therapy as:

- some cats are surprisingly easy to medicate
- some cats will eat treatments reliably in their food
- for those cats on multiple medications empty gelatine capsules obtained from a veterinarian or pharmacist can be very helpful. Several medicines can be put into one empty



gelatine capsule reducing medication into one easy dosage. This was very helpful for Morgan (the case illustrated in **Section 3**) and has meant that her medication takes only a few seconds every day and does not cause her any suffering or distress.

It may take some time for you, and your cat, to get used to all of the treatments your veterinarian has suggested but as long as your cat is happy and coping, it is worthwhile persevering. Don't forget to discuss how treatment is going with your veterinarian – if you are having problems, they may well have solutions or suggestions for you. If you find that you are having difficulties giving multiple medications to your cat, discuss these with your veterinarian who can advise you on which medications are most important for your cat.

Also, remember that we are talking about your cat – no one knows your cat better than you and if you feel that the treatment suggested is not right, for whatever reason, then your veterinarian should respect this.

I'm not sure I can cope with treating my cat – help!

Learning of a diagnosis of kidney disease is going to come as a shock and will take some time to get used to. Once you have had a chance to think things through, chat with friends/family and your veterinarian, hopefully everything will seem clearer and less daunting.

You can only do your best when it comes to caring for your cat and it is not always possible to do everything you want. For example if you have severe arthritis and are unable to give your cat a pill this may affect the level of treatment you can provide. Likewise, if your cat is completely intolerant to the thought of being medicated, this may prevent you from giving some treatments to it. In many situations, there are other options available – for example trying to hide medications in food or asking your veterinarian to give an injection of the drug. Please

note injections are not available for every type of medicine. In any case, your veterinarian should be able to talk you through the options and, together, you should be able to make a plan that you both feel comfortable with.

Is kidney disease life-threatening?

Yes – kidneys are essential body organs so any cat with kidney disease will have a reduced life expectancy. However, many cats with kidney disease can live with an excellent quality of life for several years after the diagnosis is made, especially if they receive treatment for this condition. For example, cats with **CKD** that will eat a special prescription diet formulated for cats with **CKD**, have a doubled life expectancy compared to those cats with **CKD** that will only eat standard cat food. This is discussed in more detail in [Section 2](#).

