

## **Pet Health Corner: Health Risks for Indoor vs. Outdoor Cats**

By Cynthia D. Burnett, DVM

“Sarge” was an affectionate, four-year-old cat that lived indoors. His owner gave him lots of attention and treats, but when her young grandchild came to visit it upset the cat’s routine. Sarge went into hiding for a few days and refused to eat. At first his owner was not concerned, as Sarge was overweight. When he began to drool, throw up, and his normally pink skin turned yellowish, however, she rushed the cat to the hospital.

“Tigger” was an independent eight-month-old barn cat, and his owners were careful to keep him up-to-date on vaccinations and flea and tick prevention. One day he ventured too close to the neighbor’s property and was attacked by their adult cat. Tigger’s owners didn’t realize anything was wrong until he developed huge swellings under his jaw and on the side of his head. When they examined the places closely, they saw two small puncture wounds at the middle of the swollen places.

Sarge and Tigger had two different health problems related to their different lifestyles. As an indoor cat, Sarge was relatively inactive and had mastered the art of getting extra food and treats from his loving owner. Sarge’s owner did not realize that she was putting him at risk for Hepatic Lipidosis, or “Fatty Liver Disease”, a common and often deadly illness in cats. This condition is unique to cats and occurs because the cat’s liver is not very good at breaking fat down. Overweight cats are more at risk. The disease usually occurs when a cat does not eat for several days. The cat’s body attempts to tap its fat stores for energy, but its liver cannot process the fat very well and becomes clogged.

Without treatment Fatty Liver Disease can quickly lead to liver failure, which is fatal. Symptoms include vomiting, drooling and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes). Treatment will vary depending on the severity of the case, but may include surgical insertion of a tube through which the cat is given nutritional support.

Tigger, on the other hand, needed treatment for abscesses, a problem common to outdoor cats. An abscess forms when a small puncture wound heals at the skin's surface but seals infection in. The infection worsens and pus accumulates. An abscess will eventually rupture and drain, but if it is left untreated it may cause septicemia (blood poisoning), which in turn can cause organ damage and even death. Symptoms of an abscess include swelling, fever, lethargy and loss of appetite. Treatment usually includes draining the abscess, cleaning the wound, and antibiotics.

Certainly both indoor and outdoor cats can have healthy lives, but their different lifestyles put them at risk for different problems. Whether your cat is an indoor or an outdoor cat, it will benefit from being kept up to date on vaccinations, monthly use of veterinarian-recommended tick, flea and heartworm prevention, and food that is formulated for its stage of life. It is also important to spay or neuter your cat, as this will make it less likely to roam and get in fights.

Indoor cats are more at risk for obesity and the diseases associated with being overweight, such as Diabetes, Fatty Liver Disease, and Heart Disease. For complex reasons they are also more at risk for heartworms, which do not manifest in the same way as in dogs. Cats can live for years with heartworms, but it does strain their bodies.

Outdoor cats are more at risk for common infectious diseases such as Feline Leukemia and Feline Immunodeficiency. They are also more likely to suffer bite

wounds from dogs, other cats, opossums, and snakes. Outdoor cats are also obviously more at risk of being hit by a car or lost.

Above all, your cat benefits from daily attention, which allows you to observe any changes in its behavior and any symptoms of illness.