

# Threat or Cure-All?

By Helen Enright

*Veterinarians disagree on whether Ovaban should be prescribed for cats.*



Photo: Nena Behring

Can Ovaban perform miracles for cats with behavior problems?

**W**hen Ellen left the veterinarian's office, she felt excited and happy. She had just learned that Arnie, her registered Persian, would not have to be neutered to halt his spray-marking behavior. He would still be able to father kittens.

Each year Ellen, a breeder, tried to raise one litter of Persians in hopes of producing a show-quality cat. Because of this aim, she had not had Arnie neutered or her female Persian spayed. Like many intact male cats, however, Arnie often squirted urine from a standing position to mark his territory. Ellen had to confine him to keep him from ruining her furnishings. She wished her adorable cat could have free run of the house, but

she wanted kittens, too. Now she would not have to make a choice.

Why? Arnie's veterinarian had prescribed a medication called Ovaban. Soon after starting on a regimen of 5-milligram doses twice a week, Arnie began to act like a neutered male cat. He stopped spraying, began gaining weight and became more affectionate. The doctor told Ellen to stop administering the drug four to six weeks before she expected her female to go into heat. Then Arnie would be ready to father a litter.

## Miracle Drug?

What is this drug that apparently worked such a miracle for Ellen and her cat? Ovaban is the brand name of

## CURE-ALL?

continued

a progesterone (a type of female hormone) called *megestrol acetate*. This progesterone also is manufactured under the brand name Megace, which sometimes is prescribed for women.

Developed about 15 years ago to temporarily halt the heat cycle in female dogs, Ovaban is manufactured by Schering-Plough Health Company. Ovaban is approved by the Federal Drug Administration for use in dogs only. No progesterone has been approved for use in cats, though many veterinarians prescribe Ovaban for their feline patients to modify behavior, treat skin conditions or control reproduction.

The use of Ovaban in cats is "extra label," which means the drug is used for reasons other than its original intent, says Greg J. Sumner, DVM., manager of technical services for Schering-Plough. "Veterinarians often use drugs approved for one species in another species, because no approved medications are available to treat a specific problem in the second species," he explains. "Vets base their decisions to prescribe such drugs on clinical judgment and reports in veterinary journals."

Testing a medication on many different species is expensive, Dr. Sumner says, so a drug may earn approval for use in just one species but may be

safe for use in more than one. He is cautious but positive about the use of Ovaban in cats. "I have heard of veterinarians prescribing Ovaban on a continuing basis to stop urine marking and spraying in male cats," he says. "I see no harm in this if a cat is monitored regularly by the veterinarian prescribing the drug."

### Not a Cure-All

Margaret, Ellen's mother-in-law, had a purebred male cat named Felix whom she had confined because of his spraying. After hearing from Ellen about Arnie's case, Margaret asked her veterinarian, Dr. Melvin C. Haddad, to prescribe Ovaban for Felix. To her surprise, Dr. Haddad said that Ovaban is only a short-term solution to a spraying problem, and he would not prescribe it for any cat over a long period. He told Margaret that at professional seminars he had attended in recent years, other veterinarians had issued warnings about the overuse of Ovaban.

Dr. Haddad has been a veterinarian since 1967. Fifty percent of his patients are cats. "At one time Ovaban was considered a cure-all for almost anything that ailed a cat," he says. "If a cat was aggressive, sprayed, suffered loss of appetite or had milialy [allergic] dermatitis, the veterinarian prescribed Ovaban."

Today Dr. Haddad prescribes Ovaban infrequently. In its place he prescribes cortisone to treat milialy

dermatitis and Valium to treat aggressive cats or to stimulate the appetites of chronically ill cats. He prescribes Ovaban for male cats that spray, but never for longer than 10 days. If a cat relapses and begins spraying again, Dr. Haddad may prescribe the drug a second time, but he also suggests that the owner try behavior modification, such as confining the cat to a cage equipped with a litter box.

Dr. Haddad is cautious about prescribing Ovaban because he has seen diabetes mellitus develop in cats given the drug. According to a recent article in a veterinary journal, Ovaban can cause feline diabetes the same way pregnancy, a condition characterized by high progesterone levels, can cause diabetes in women.

Other reported side effects of Ovaban include increased thirst, weight gain due to increased appetite, change in temperament (increased friendliness), elevated blood sugar, elevated levels of fats in the blood and elevated levels of insulin. Ovaban also can affect the adrenal gland, which secretes cortisone. Although the drug can inhibit male fertility, Dr. Sumner says no evidence of long-term effects exists.

### Differing Opinions

Veterinarians differ in their opinions about how—or if—to use Ovaban in cats. Chris Walker, DVM., says he customizes his use of the drug for every patient and circumstance. "Ovaban is a steroid, as cortisone is, and has to be respected as such," he says. "It can't be put into a dispenser and left in the waiting room of a veterinary clinic."

Many veterinarians prescribe Ovaban only as a last resort to alleviate spraying behavior. Often behavior modification will work without the need for medication. "One male kitten I treated felt threatened by the stray cats outside his home," Dr. Walker says. "He would go from window to window, watching the intruders and leaving a small urine mark at each window." Medication would not have solved the kitten's problem and, at best, would only have inhibited his reaction to the cats. Dr. Walker recommended that the owners spray repellents outdoors to keep the stray cats away from the house.

Dr. Walker treats a behavior problem by first trying to determine the cause. A cat may spray because it feels challenged or frustrated, or to mark its territory. "To use Ovaban as a first step would be skipping over the prob-



Photo: Arvinda A. Wilson

Veterinarians sometimes prescribe Ovaban for cats that spray urine to mark their territory, as this cat is preparing to do.

lem," Dr. Walker says. If the cause of the spraying is not readily apparent, he sometimes recommends that the owner take the cat to an animal behaviorist.

Some veterinarians prescribe Ovaban to inhibit aggression in cats. Like spraying behavior, however, aggression can often be treated successfully with behavior modification.

"The sudden onset of fighting between two cats in a household is often related to an independent frightening event that occurred in the presence of both cats," says Stephen J. Ettinger, D.V.M., in the *Textbook of Veterinary Internal Medicine: Diseases of the Dog and Cat* (W.B. Saunders Company, 1989). Each cat associates the other with the frightening experience and responds with aggression and with fearful facial and body expressions, he continues. In this kind of situation, Ovaban might help only temporarily. Once the cats stop taking the drug, they probably will resume fighting. What they need is a form of behavior modification called desensitization, which would make them less sensitive to each other and help them overcome their fear.

Dr. Walker has prescribed Ovaban to alleviate aggressive behavior in a few cats. He sometimes prescribes the drug to treat cases of miliary dermatitis. One cat with this chronic condition has taken Ovaban for years and has suffered no adverse effects. The cat shows no signs of diabetes or any of the other reported side effects of Ovaban.

### Learn All You Can

Dr. Sumner, Dr. Walker and Dr. Haddad clearly assess the value and possible applications of Ovaban differently. The disparity in their opinions should alert all people who own and love cats to learn everything they can about the medications prescribed for their pets. When you take your cat to a veterinarian, don't be afraid to ask questions. If you have any doubt about a medication or procedure prescribed for your cat, get a second opinion from another veterinarian. Remember, "FDA approved" does not mean a medication has been approved for use in cats.

If your cat is currently taking Ovaban and you are concerned about its health, ask your veterinarian to check

the cat for diabetes. Watch your cat for signs of the disease. These include drinking excessive amounts of water, frequent urination and weight gain or loss. Observe your cat for any of the other side effects associated with Ovaban.

When Ellen heard what Dr. Haddad had told her mother-in-law about Ovaban, she consulted her veterinarian again about his prescription for Arnie. The doctor would not answer her questions. Ellen stopped giving Arnie Ovaban and took him to another veterinarian. So far the Persian has not begun spraying again.

Arnie's new veterinarian found nothing wrong with Arnie, but the doctor does not know if the cat has suffered some unseen damage from long-term usage of Ovaban. Arnie may be fine, and the first veterinarian may be right: Perhaps Ovaban is a solution to some age-old feline behavior problems. ☺

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*Helen Enright has been a professional cat groomer for 10 years. A former breeder, she raised Siamese for 15 years and currently owns five cats.*