

The Adventure of Ozzy

by Maria Claver, PhD, MSW

We noticed that Ozzy had lost a good amount of weight, but figured it was a result of the diet he was forced to go on since his sister, Gidget, had to lose some weight. When he started acting strange, not wanting to be around us, we decided to take him in to see the vet and find out what was going on. They took a blood sample and we were expecting that the worst case scenario would be a thyroid problem and that he would have to take a pill every day for the rest of his long life. When we received the news that his blood work indicated a kidney problem, I immediately brought him to the vet for more tests and the day began a very long, painful weekend of not knowing what would happen next or if we would have our Ozzy much longer...

Ozzy was rescued as an 8 week old kitten from a Los Angeles rescue. We knew we wanted to adopt a black kitten, to make a statement against all of the superstitions people still seem to have about black cats, even in this day and age. The rescue staff led us back to a cage that contained the only two black kittens they had at the time. We knew right off that one of the kittens was special – he looked smart! Ozzy came home with us and after a day, ran the house! He certainly was a special cat from a young age. He learned how to fetch, came to us when called, and welcomed visitors (not “typical” cat behavior, I’d say).

When we learned last Fall that Ozzy had abnormally-shaped kidneys and was probably born that way, we were told that with 24-hour care for a few days, consisting of constant saline drip to flush out his kidneys and a special diet, he had a 50% chance of improving kidney function enough to survive. Those three days were the longest of my life. I didn’t know if we’d be making preparations to care for him at home or if we’d be making a decision to let Ozzy go.

After a very stressful and expensive three days, Ozzy was responding well to the treatment and I was asked to attend a training to show me how to administer saline necessary to keep Ozzy as healthy as possible – this consisted of pinching the skin on his back into a “tent shape” and inserting a needle (a thick needle!) attached to a bag of saline. Not only did I have to get the needle in, I had to figure out how to get it to stay there for the 15-20 minutes it took to give him enough saline for the day. By the way, how much was enough?

My husband and I were committed to doing whatever it took to provide Ozzy with a good quality of life, but there were times we thought we just were not going to be able to do it. Once he gained some of his strength back, Ozzy fought the needle. It was during these times that working with Dr. Rattan to find solutions to the challenges we were having was a true gift. He suggested using a muzzle to calm Ozzy down. The muzzle did wonders. When we put it on him, he instantly calmed down, knowing it was time for “business.” The other major challenge was figuring out how much saline was enough. We brought Ozzy in for a blood draw to check his levels every month to six weeks and at one scary point when his kidney function seemed to decline significantly, we learned that daily saline was necessary to keep him going. Other suggestions that Dr. Rattan helped us with was that we could give Ozzy boiled plain chicken and whole lactose-free milk to help Ozzy gain some weight.

Maintaining Ozzy’s health is a delicate balancing act. It takes the dedication and courage of everyone involved to figure out what it takes to keep him feeling as well as he can. At times, it requires honest conversations about the quality of his life and under what circumstances we should consider letting him go. It is so important that the veterinarian not only communicate with the pet’s guardian, but that he or she also listen – We are so fortunate that Dr. Rattan has done both with respect and compassion.

This experience has been such an adventure, at times heart wrenching, at times celebratory, that I have established a non-profit organization, "the ozzy foundation" (of course), that will support pet guardians financially and with social support, when their pet is diagnosed with a chronic illness. It is our hope that we can share with others the journey we are going through, to let people going through something similar know that however scary caring for a chronically ill pet might be, every moment of health, every nuzzle or purr is so worth the trials and tribulations of learning how to care for your furry loved one. Ozzy has taught us so many lessons and I appreciate the opportunity to share them with others.

Our website will be up as soon as the wonderful people who have volunteered their talent can construct it: www.ozzyfoundation.org. Come visit us in Spring 2008!