

Hairballs 101

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It is the sound no cat owner wants to hear -- the gagging, the hacking. Then the hairball seems to always land on the new carpet, never on easy-to-clean surfaces. Just why do cats develop hairballs? Even more importantly, what can owners do to reduce them?

First, face the feline facts. Hairballs are common and develop because of how cats groom. As cats lick their fuzzy bodies, the tongue's tiny barbs pull off excess hair, explain veterinarians. Inevitably, cats swallow some hair. Ideally, it passes through the body and ends up in stools, but hairballs form when hair instead wads up in the belly. The cat vomits to expel the wad, digested food, saliva and gastric secretions.

Usually harmless to pets and just a messy annoyance for owners, hairballs can become a serious medical problem, however, when they're not expelled. Marni Bellavia of Sunrise, Fla., learned that the hard way when her Himalayan Ragdoll named Princess developed a hairball mass in her esophagus, requiring surgery to remove it.

"I was so freaked out," says Bellavia. "It was really disgusting. After surgery, Princess, fortunately, was fine."

Hairballs, it seems, can become so big that they cause blockages in the stomach or intestines. If a cat is dehydrated, its stomach contents can become dry and form a blockage, explain veterinarians. Curious cats who swallow string can suffer from blockages as the string mixes with hair and minerals to form compact hard obstructions called trichobezoars.

Immediate surgery is a must if the intestine becomes blocked. Vomiting and possibly pain would occur if the hairball were located in the stomach. Constipation would occur if the hair were in the colon.

Some hairballs can be removed by anesthetizing the cat and inserting a scooping tool into the mouth and down its digestive tract to retrieve the mass. Sometimes, surgery in which a veterinarian makes an incision into the abdomen and/or stomach is required.

Emergencies "fortunately are quite rare, but they can happen. Usually, hairballs are very simple problems," says Linda Ross, DVM, an internal medicine specialist at Tufts University Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine in North Grafton, Mass.

Here are five ways to tame hairballs:

1. Bring out the brush. Good regular brushings are an important basic step, even for short-haired cats. Brushings reduce the amount of hair cats swallow. Rubber curry brushes are excellent for removing loose hair. For cats who detest brushes, try stroking gently with nub-covered grooming gloves. Strive to groom longhaired cats daily and treat shorthaired cats to a minimum of weekly groom sessions.
2. Intestinal lubricants, such as Laxatone, are a popular second basic step to employ to help hairballs pass through the digestive tract. Some cats consider it a treat. The gels come in flavors like tuna or malt. Be sure to use enough.

According to Drew Weigner, DVM, who operates a cat-only practice in Atlanta, the biggest problems with intestinal lubricants are not using enough each time or not using it frequently enough. In almost all cases, the most effective dose is a two-inch strip from the tube of lubricant twice daily for two days. Yet, this is far more than indicated on the label. His advice: For cats who like the taste, giving them an inch every day or two will prevent hairballs. If they don't, just give the above dose for two days. When hairballs return, repeat the initial dose.

3. If all else fails, intestinal lubricants can be given along with a prescribed drug called Metoclopramide, which facilitates the emptying of the stomach, Dr. Weigner says. "Generally, hairballs should be resolved within 48 hours with this regime," Dr. Weigner says. "If not, either the problem is not hairballs, or a hairball is lodged and may need to be removed surgically."
4. Avoid home remedies, especially mineral oil, which "can be dangerous," advises Dr. Ross. "You don't want to give your cat a liquid oil like mineral oil or baby oil directly in the mouth." Cats tend to inhale such oils into their lungs because they're practically flavorless and they don't signal that they're edible.
5. Consult your veterinarian about commercially prepared "hairball diets" that have received mixed results. These higher-fiber foods are intended to help cats pass hairballs in their stools.

In the end, be prepared to go through a process of trial and error to help your cat – and don't give up. Same goes for your hairball-assaulted carpet. The good news, Dr. Weigner says, is cleaning hairball stains from carpet is relatively easy. The mess is relatively dry, after all.

"Even in problem situations," he says, "the material can usually be vacuumed up after it dries."

- By Sally Deneen, a freelance writer from Seattle and co-author of *The Dog Lover's Companion to Florida* (Avalon Travel Publishing).