

Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University



CATNIP



The Newsletter for Caring Cat Owners

*CAT BATTLES HAIR BALLS
& DIGESTION PROBLEMS*



I have a very smart nine-year-old "tuxedo" cat named Freeway. I acquired her when she was only five weeks old. Freeway grooms herself all the time, and has a very hard time with hair balls. Most of the time, she appears to be in discomfort, and she vomits a lot, maybe five out of every seven days.

She is at the veterinarian's office frequently for the discomfort and vomiting. One doctor diagnosed her with pancreatitis, although no blood work was done. After seven years of this, I took her to another veterinarian, who ordered more blood work and X-rays. The blood tests came back normal, but the X-rays revealed hairballs packed into her stomach. I've always suspected that her vomiting was hairball related. I've tried Laxatone®, but that just made her vomit even more. I tried special hairball control diets, but they, too, cause her to vomit. Now I give her a half-teaspoon of Vaseline®, because she's been constipated, but it doesn't help.

Freeway has never been much of a water drinker. However, lately, I see her at the water bowl a lot, which makes me happy (because it helps with her constipation), but concerned. Is there anything I can do to help with her hairball problem?

*Becki P. Orr
Vineland, New Jersey*

Dear Becki:

I must start my reply with a compliment: you have been very patient to tolerate nearly daily vomiting for the last seven years! The good news is that unless something has recently changed, the vomiting is likely not due to cancer, since by now, more serious signs of illness would have developed. However, this is not to say that daily vomiting is okay.

You have mentioned two things in your letter that are somewhat alarming. First, you stated that a hairball is visible in the stomach on a radiograph. Hairballs that do not pass should be surgically removed. If the hairball is repeatedly found on radiographs, surgery must be considered. A hairball stuck in the stomach may be vomited back into the esophagus and cause great harm.

Next, your cat has started to drink a lot of water. This could indicate a new problem, such as diabetes or kidney disease, and should be immediately looked into. A trip to your veterinarian is recommended.

Getting back to your original question, what can be done about hairballs? Hairballs are a major problem for long haired cats. Cats normally swallow hair and it usually passes without incident. However, cats that groom excessively (such as those afflicted with skin allergies) and long haired cats may develop hairball problems.

Hairballs represent a matted accumulation of hair in the stomach that frequently is expelled through vomiting. To reduce vomiting secondary to hairballs, either reduce the amount of hair ingested or help the body to pass ingested hair.

Frequent brushing is helpful. A trip to the pet grooming salon, with the consideration of a whole body clip, may be prudent. You may aid the passage of hair through the gastrointestinal tract with a petroleum-based lubricant, such as Kat-A-Lax®, Laxíaire®, or Laxatone® (there are many available). Vaseline® may be administered safely, however, many cats find the taste unpleasant. I hope you find my advice helpful. Let us know if surgical removal of a large hairball cures your cat. Best of luck to you and your pet.

Michael Stone DVM, ACVIM

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