



Paw Prints

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Columnist

The mystery behind feline hairballs

Your Maine coon cat is napping peacefully on your bed, when suddenly she bolts up, wide awake and is clearly uncomfortable. She extends her neck and hacks and gags in distress. Then, to her relief (and your dismay), she regurgitates something unusual-looking on your coverlet.

The scary-looking cylindrical shaped UFO that kitty has disgorged is actually a trichobezoar or commonly referred to as a hairball.

The hairball or the damp wad of undigested hair, moistened by your cat's

digestive juices, is actually the unpleasant side effect of Kitty's natural desire to stay clean.

Cats are fastidious self-groomers and as Kitty grooms herself, she swallows a lot of the dead hair that has come loose. It's the tiny backward slanted projections on the surface of her rough tongue that propel the hair down her throat and into her stomach. While most of the hair eventually passes through her digestive tract, some of it remains in the stomach and gradually accumulates into a wet clump — the hairball..

It's not uncommon for your cat to vomit the occasional hairball and there is usually no cause for alarm, but in some cases hairballs become too big for a cat's digestive tract and may cause a blockage that can be life-threatening.

Although hairballs are more prevalent in long-haired breeds such as Persians and Maine coons, all cats can develop hairballs, especially in the spring and summer when cats shed their coats. And some cats are just naturally more fastidious than others

in their grooming habits.

Don't assume all cat coughing or vomiting can be blamed on hairballs. It could be a sign of another medical issue, such as an intestinal disorder. There are a couple key symptoms that can distinguish a harmless hairball from one that may require immediate medical attention.

You should be concerned if Kitty goes through the motions of hacking up a hairball without anything to show for it. Repeated gagging and retching may be a sign that a hairball is too large to pass into the intestines, can't be spit up or has formed an obstruction in the digestive tract.

She may also have diarrhea, refuse to eat and become lethargic. If your furry friend shows any of these signs, have your veterinarian examine her.

Another problem caused by hairballs is that sometimes their symptoms appear similar to respiratory problems, such as asthma, which also requires your vet's attention.

If a hairball gets too big, it may require surgical removal.



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Uh-oh, here comes a hairball...

And if you're finding more hairballs than usual — more than two to three a week — it may be a sign that your cat is grooming excessively, which may be due to underlying skin conditions, parasites or behavioral problems.

The best defense against hairballs is to keep your cat from getting them in the first place.

The best way to avoid hairballs is to brush your

cat regularly. You can also ask your veterinarian about special hairball diets, as well as oral hairball remedies that can help propel Kitty's hair through the digestive tract, so it ends up in a litterbox instead of the carpet, or trapped in her intestines.

A tip for chronic hairball hackers: Increase their fiber intake. The fiber will help hold onto hair and aid it in passing through the digestive tract.

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