

HAIR BALLS IN CATS

All cats should groom!

All cats groom, whether they be our pampered domestic housecats, or 600 pound tigers **BUT, hairballs are rare in zoo cats.** Adult housecats will groom an average of 3.6 hours per day, or approximately 25% of waking hours. Their barbed tongue removes loose hair, which is then swallowed. While most of this hair eventually passes through your cat's digestive tract and exits in the faeces, some of it remains in the stomach and gradually accumulates into a wet clump (a hairball). By the time you see the hairball it tends to be a tubular, sausage shape because it has either been brought up from the small intestine or takes the shape of the oesophagus (food tube) as it is vomited out. Because the hair is tightly packed and often has been rolling around in the stomach for weeks at a time it tends to be a darker brown colour and is easily confused with cat faeces.

If 25% of waking hours is the "normal" grooming time for cats, there are some cats that fall outside of this "norm". Cats may groom *less* frequently if they suffer from pain or stiffness, such as arthritis, or if they are feeling "under the weather". Some cats may just be more fastidious and groom a bit more than average but others groom *more* often because they are suffering from itchy skin, parasites (eg fleas), allergies, illness, pain (eg cystitis), or stress. Longhaired cats are at greater risk of ingesting more hair. You may see a seasonal pattern where your cat gets more hairballs when they start to shed their coat.

Cats that are "normal" groomers and "under" groomers should not have hairballs, ever. Overgroomers may have hairballs.

So what happens to all that hair?

If your cat is grooming a normal (or sub-normal) amount, and their stomach and intestines are normal, then the hair passes through in their faeces, and everyone is happy.

If your cat is over-grooming, and their stomach and intestines are normal, then usually the hair still passes through in their faeces. The excess hair MAY cause irritation of the colon, termed *hair-associated colitis*. You may see some frank blood on the faeces as the rough hair irritates the colon on the way out. Other cats will vomit up an obvious hairball. In some cats the hair can pack together so tightly that it forms a physical and often life-threatening blockage in the stomach or intestines, called a *trichobezoar*.

No matter how much your cat grooms, if their stomach or intestines are abnormal, then they are much more likely to vomit hairballs (and do so more frequently) or have a trichobezoar.

This is because there is some disease process preventing the hair from moving along the gastrointestinal tract. Two common afflictions that may do this are a food intolerance, and inflammatory bowel disease; however, stress and disease affecting the nervous system can affect the gut's motility and reduce clearance of hair ingested.

Inflammatory bowel disease is a serious condition in cats and can lead to intestinal lymphoma, a type of cancer, if not treated.

Treating a cat with hairballs

To successfully treat a cat that vomits hairballs, we must determine the cause of the over-grooming or gastrointestinal disease. An exam may determine the cause, if evidence of parasites (eg fleas) is found, but many times further diagnostics are necessary.

Some diagnostics that may be suggested include:

- Anti-parasite trial for parasites not immediately evident on exam
- Food analysis for possible intolerances
- Wellness blood testing to look for underlying illness
- Abdominal ultrasound to look for thickening of the intestines
- Biopsies of the intestinal tract

If diagnostics do not lead us to an answer, or if your cat is continuing to vomit hairballs while we are beginning treatment, we may suggest prevention strategies:

- Reduce stress in your cat's environment – I can give you lots of extra information on this!
- Daily grooming to remove loose hair, shaving when needed
- Hairball diets
 - Contain increased amounts of insoluble fibre to improve gastric (stomach) emptying
- Added fibre – psyllium husks and water, pumpkin can be added to wet food but in small amounts and under veterinary advice as adding too much can create its own problems.
- Frequent, small meals to encourage gastric emptying and intestinal motility
- Lubricants/oils to move hair through – long term this can deplete the body of fat soluble vitamins (Vitamins A, D, E). Some hairball lubricant products will have added vitamins.

*****These should only be used after underlying factors have been considered and dealt with, otherwise we are only treating a symptom and not a disease*****

VISIT MY WEBSITE FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT HOW TO GROOM AND WHAT TOOLS TO USE UNDER THE "PRODUCTS I USE" section on the SCRATCHING POST tab on the top menu.