

Ask A Vet: Those Horrible Hairballs

Sunday, March 23, 2014

Dear Doctor Weldy's,

My cat has hairballs all the time and it's driving me crazy! How can I stop her from throwing up all over?

Dear Reader,

I understand and I wish I had a simple answer. Hairballs are frustrating and (according to my family) gross. You didn't say exactly how often "all the time" is. If hairballs make their appearance less than twice a month, regular grooming to reduce the amount of hair your cat swallows may help. If your cat is not a fond of the brush or comb, a grooming mitt or the ZoomGroom may be tolerated better. Other possible remedies for the cat that has infrequent hairballs include hairball diets and the petrolatum based preventives. The preventives need to be given on a regular basis to be effective. A combination of regular grooming, diet and preventives will give the best results.

However, a cat that is vomiting hairballs twice a month or more may have a more serious problem that needs to be addressed. Kidney disease, hyperthyroidism, severe constipation and certain parasites can be causes of vomiting. A good physical exam and bloodwork are essential to determine if any of these are the reason hairballs/vomiting are becoming more frequent. A fecal examination may also be needed to rule out parasites.

Dietary intolerance, commonly called food allergies, may also be a reason your cat is bringing up hairballs or vomiting more frequently. Dietary intolerance is diagnosed by feeding a special food for several weeks. It may take trying several different diets to determine if a particular protein or carbohydrate source is a problem for your cat.

Another common cause of chronic hairballs/vomiting is intestinal disease. A recently published study found that the most common intestinal disease causing hairballs/vomiting is inflammatory bowel disease, followed closely by infiltrative intestinal lymphoma. If your veterinarian has ruled out other causes, your cat is likely to benefit from tests looking for inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) or other intestinal diseases such as diffuse lymphoma or other cancers.

An ultrasound examination can determine if the intestines are thicker than normal, but will not tell why. Surgically obtained intestinal biopsies are needed to make a definitive diagnosis of IBD, lymphoma or other cancers of the intestines. Without a diagnosis, your veterinarian can only "guess" at the best treatment(s) for your cat.

If you have tried grooming, hairball diets, and preventives and you are still finding hairballs on a regular basis, a trip to the veterinarian should be on your to-do list.

-Dr. Teresa Alessandri