

Cat Hairballs - Inevitable - Or Are They?

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My Experience with Cat Hairballs



Having been a cats-only veterinarian for over 20 years, I naturally have many memories of the cats and their humans that have graced my clinic doors. Fortunately, the happy memories by far outweigh the sad. In addition, there is a nice blend of humorous moments that help lighten our days. In a profession that deals with life and death, those lighter moments are much appreciated.

Included among the lighter moments are the laughs we sometimes have over the great multitude of self-diagnosed cat hairballs. It often seems that every coughing cat, vomiting cat, or some days every cat with any illness at all, have been self-proclaimed by their humans to have cat hairballs.

My technicians have even perfected their impersonations of a cat retching and finally producing a hairball and they are hilarious! Good YouTube material, perhaps!

The truth of the matter is that cat hairballs are no laughing matter for your cat. While cats can certainly suffer from a wide variety of conditions that lead to cat vomiting or gagging, such as hyperthyroidism, diabetes, kidney disease, and inflammatory bowel disease, hair balls are quite often causes of cat vomiting.

I am not suggesting that you stay away from the vet when your cat is having these signs, though. The truth is that you don't know, and even your vet won't know, what is bothering your cat until we get a detailed history from you and perform a thorough examination. Even then we may not have the answer, and blood tests or even x-rays may be needed.

However, feline hairballs are quite often a problem, and not just for those cats that are sick enough to be brought to the veterinarian, but for all kitties. Cats and hairballs go together and the reason is fairly simple – their self-grooming habits make hairballs inevitable. Or do they?

Fortunately, hairballs in cats can now be a thing of the past – hairballs are NOT inevitable! Hairball prevention is completely possible, but knowing how to prevent hairballs in cats requires understanding what hairballs are and why they occur.



What is a Cat Hairball?

I've occasionally been asked about the difference between fur and hair and whether we should say that a cat has fur or a cat has hair. Theoretically, all fur is hair, but not all hair is fur. All mammals have hair, but the term "fur" is usually reserved for very thick body hair. However, we often use the terms hair and fur interchangeably when we describe the covering on a cat's body.

As far as cat hair ball terminology goes, we most often call the hair that cats swallow and throw back up "hairballs", although they are sometimes also referred to as a "fur ball". The official scientific name is a

trichobezoar which is basically a moist clump of undigested hair, dampened by bile and other digestive fluids – in other words, a cat hairball.

What Does a Hairball Look Like?

If you have never seen one, then you probably have never lived with a cat! While cat hair balls are sometimes confused with feces by the untrained eye of a new cat owner, once you've seen one, you'll never forget.

A hairball has a cylindrical shape, something like a cigar, and is most often slender and elongated due to its passage up from the stomach through the narrow esophagus. They vary in size from an inch to several inches long. If you look closely, you can see the interwoven hairs that make up the furball.

What Causes Hairballs?

Cats Hairballs are caused by the self-grooming habits of the cat. If there is a lot of dead, loose hair, it will be swallowed as a cat uses his rough tongue to clean himself. Most of the hair will pass through the intestinal tract and out in the feces, but some remains in the stomach. Over time, as more is added, a hairball develops.

The incidence of cats hairballs varies according to several factors. Older cats groom more than do kittens and young cats. Also, some cats are just naturally more fastidious than others. In addition, long-haired breeds are likely to ingest more hair than shorter-haired breeds. Also, hairballs are more common during the seasons in which cats shed their coats.

All Hairballs Are Not Created Equally

There are many different factors that contribute to hairballs in cats, from the types of cat hair to the length of the hair to seasonal and temperature influences.

Different Types of Cat Hair

Cats generally have from one to three types of hair plus their distinctive whiskers, which are also hairs.

- Guard Hairs – These are the longer, stiffer hairs and usually determine the basic color of the cat. They also repel water and keep a cat dry.
- Undercoat – The fluffier, softer hair that keeps a cat warm is referred to as the undercoat or "Down." The undercoat is the hair that is shed the most and will most easily mat. This is the layer of hair that is the source of hair your cat will ingest the most while grooming.
- Awn Hairs – The finer hairs that usually form the basic coat of a cat are called awn hairs.
- Whiskers - the long hairs attached to nerve cells in the face

Different Types of Coats

Long-Haired Cats

Long-haired cats have hair that can be as much as five inches long. This includes such cats as Ragdolls, Persians, and Himalayans. They have all three types of hair: guard hair, awn, and an abundance of down. Their soft, fine, downy fur makes them particularly at risk for excessive shedding and matting. Their hair can also easily tangle and get foreign material stuck in it, especially if they go outside.

Short-haired Cats

Short-haired cats (Siamese, Burmese, etc.) have hair that usually measures less than two inches in length.

Hairless Cats

There is no such thing as a cat without hair. Hairless cats have hair that is very short and close to the skin. (The sparse, baby-fine hairs found on a breed such as the Sphynx are called vellus.)

Seasonal Influences on Cats with Hairballs

Common sense tells you that if a cat lives inside your house all the time, it will shed year round. However, even an indoor cat will shed more during the main shedding season, which is springtime. As the weather gets warmer, the undercoat loosens. More hair will be shed and the cat will therefore ingest more hair, leading to an increase in hairballs.

Signs of Hairballs in Cats

If you've lived with even one cat, you have no doubt experienced the sound of a cat trying to bring up a hairball. Retch, hack, and gag. And the sight of one on your floor can look quite disgusting, or worse yet, feel disgusting if you step on it with bare feet.

To a new cat owner, the first encounter with hairballs and cats can be alarming. The sounds and the posture that cats assume when they are attempting to bring up a hairball can make us think our cats are choking. While most hairballs are harmless, the truth of the matter is they are a source of real discomfort for your cat, leading to feline vomiting or constipation or worse. Hairballs can even lead to something as serious as an intestinal obstruction, requiring surgery.

If your kitty has hairball symptoms such as frequent, dry coughing or hacking, has a decreased interest in food, and acts lethargic or depressed, hairballs may be the problem. An occasional hairball may be nothing to worry about. However, lethargy and loss of appetite for more than a day or so or repeated episodes of unproductive retching can be cause for concern.

Traditional Cat Hairball Remedies

There are various methods of cat hairball treatments that have been tried over the years. These methods of hairball control include: hairball formula food, gels to lubricate, or granules sprinkled on food to provide bulk - both in an effect to help hairballs pass through the digestive system. An at-home cat hairball remedy, such as butter or canned pumpkin, has been used for the same purpose.

But what if instead of treating hairballs in your cat, you could PREVENT them?

By now, you may have figured out for yourself how we can do that. But I'll sum it up anyway.

- To prevent hairballs would mean that you need to reduce the amount of hair your cat ingests while grooming himself.
- The main type of hair that cats shed, and therefore ingest, is the undercoat or "down" layer.
- As the undercoat hairs become loose, your cat will ingest the hair, and will loosen more with his rough-surfaced tongue.
- This layer of cat hair is not addressed by standard grooming procedures.
- To decrease the amount of hair your cat sheds and therefore ingests requires that you have a method of removing your cat's loose undercoat.

Fortunately, there is a tool that does just that. Thanks to FURminator® deShedding Tools for cats, hairballs can be minimized or even prevented with regular use, without medication. It does a better job of grooming pets than any of the other pet grooming products I have ever used. It's perfect for **preventing hairballs!**