

CONSTIPATION IN CATS (MEGACOLON)

What is constipation?

Constipation can be defined as an abnormal accumulation of feces resulting in difficult bowel movements. This may result in reduced frequency or absence of defecation. The feces are retained in the large intestine or *colon*. Since one of the major functions of the colon is water absorption, the retained feces become hard and dry, which makes passing the feces even more difficult. Constipated cats strain in an attempt to defecate resulting in abdominal pain. Some constipated cats may pass small amounts of liquid feces or blood as a result of excessive straining.

What causes constipation?

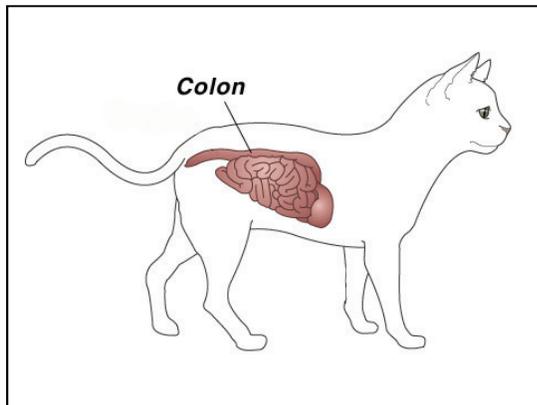
Factors associated with the development of constipation include:

1. Hairballs, especially in long-haired cats.
2. Ingestion of foreign bodies.
3. Pelvic injuries resulting in a narrowed pelvic canal.
4. In some cases, there is no obvious cause identified.

Constipation is a condition seen most commonly in middle-aged and older cats.

What is megacolon?

The gastrointestinal tract terminates in a tubular organ called the colon. The colon serves as a site for absorption of water and storage of fecal material. It is continuous with the rectum. The walls of the colon contain muscles that are stimulated to contract by nerves from the spinal cord. When the colon contracts, fecal material is pushed out of the body.



If the nerves to the colon do not function normally, the muscles of the colonic wall will not contract properly. If this happens, the muscles become stretched and the colon enlarges in diameter. This enlarged colon may have a diameter three to four times that of a normal cat. Fecal material accumulates in the distended colon and is not pushed out through the rectum in a normal manner, resulting in severe constipation or *obstipation*. This massive enlargement of the colon and the resulting constipation is called *megacolon*.

What causes megacolon?

An injury to the spinal cord can cause megacolon. Also, mechanical obstruction caused by tumors, foreign bodies, hairballs, and strictures can lead to megacolon. However, in most cases, we cannot determine the reason that the nerves to the colon stop functioning. This disease generally occurs in middle-aged to older cats, but has also been seen in cats as young as three to four years old. In cases that do not have an identifiable cause, the condition is termed *idiopathic megacolon*.



How are constipation and megacolon diagnosed?

In most cases, a diagnosis of constipation can be made on the basis of the cat's clinical signs and medical history. Affected cats usually strain unsuccessfully to defecate and may cry in pain. Any feces passed are hard and dry. The cat may also show signs of lethargy, reluctance to eat, abdominal pain and distention and vomiting.

Further tests may be needed in order to diagnose the cause of the constipation and these may

include abdominal and pelvic x-rays to look for pelvic injuries, colonic strictures or tumors. X-rays are also the primary test for the diagnosis of megacolon.

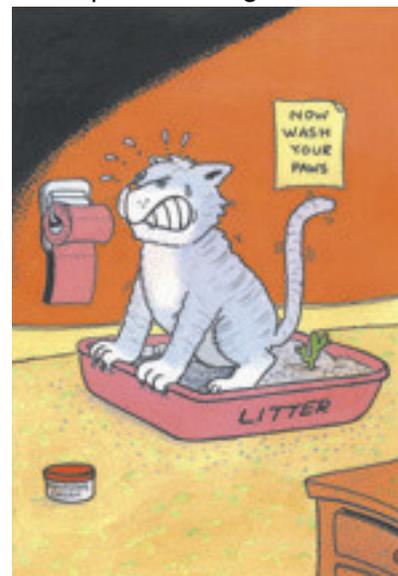
How can constipation and megacolon be treated?

Treatment varies depending on the cause of constipation. If an obstruction such as a colonic tumor is present, surgical treatment may be performed.

Initial treatment of a cat with constipation may involve administration of enemas and manual extraction of feces by a veterinarian. Removal of feces often requires an anesthetic or sedative. Treatment of dehydration with intravenous fluids may also be needed in cats that have become dehydrated due to decreased appetite and water consumption. If the constipation recurs or becomes a long-term problem, continuous therapy may be needed to prevent recurrence. A wide variety of treatments are available to soften the feces and promote regular bowel movements. High fiber diets may be helpful and lubricating laxatives or stool softeners may also be used in mildly affected cats. Those more severely affected may need drugs that stimulate contraction of the colon. The doses of all of these drugs may need to be altered to produce the desired effect. Ideally, cats should defecate at least once every other day. Over a period of time, resistance to the treatment may be found necessitating an increase in the drug dosage or a change in therapy. No changes to the treatment protocol should be made without consulting your veterinarian.

In long-haired cats, regular grooming and hairball removal agents and diets may reduce hair ingestion and the likelihood of hairballs causing constipation.

It is important to ensure that there is always access to a clean litter tray so that frequent defecation is encouraged.



Usually, a medical approach is tried first, with surgery reserved for unresponsive or advanced cases. A medical approach involves the use of laxatives, stool softeners, colon wall stimulants, high fiber diets, or low residue diets. These do not correct the underlying cause, but they do allow fecal material to pass so the cat does not become constipated and ill. Drugs that increase the movement of the colon called prokinetics are sometimes prescribed.



The medical approach may be successful for several months or years, but will often fail eventually. When this happens, surgery must be considered. A procedure called *subtotal colectomy* removes the non-functioning part of the colon. Although this procedure may involve removal of most of the colon, the anal sphincter will be left intact, so the cat should not lose bowel control.

Can the cat function without its colon?

Since one of the colon's primary responsibilities is to remove excess fluid from the fecal material, the cat that has had a subtotal colectomy will have rather soft stools immediately after surgery. In addition, it may pass several bowel movements each day. However, after one to two months, the stools will become formed and the cat will have an average of three bowel movements every two days. There should be no loss of fecal control.

SPECIFIC FEEDING INSTRUCTIONS

1. Feed your cat _____ cups/cans of _____ each 24 hours in two to four feedings.
2. Give your cat the following medications:

Adjust the dosage of laxatives so your cat has a bowel movement at least once every other day. If diarrhea occurs, reduce the dosage or the frequency of administration.

What is the long-term outlook for a cat with this problem?

The long-term outlook varies according to the cause of the constipation; however, most cats can be adequately managed without surgery and resume normal, healthy lives. For cats that require surgery to correct megacolon, the prognosis is usually good, though the cat might have diarrhea for while after surgery.
