

VOMITING IN CATS

Vomiting describes the active expulsion of food from the stomach. It may be related to disorders of the stomach but is a clinical sign that can occur with many diseases and problems. It is not a specific disease or diagnosis itself. Cats vomit quite readily and occasional vomiting in an otherwise healthy cat may not indicate anything abnormal. This is particularly true if the vomited material consists largely of hair. It is considered a normal process for cats to retain hair and vomit hairballs periodically. Regular brushings and hairball remedies and diets can reduce this problem which is more common in long haired cats.

It has been estimated that cats groom themselves for up to 1/3 of their waking hours. The problem begins as the cat swallows the hair it has licked off during the cleaning process. The barb-like projections on the cat's tongue pull the hair loose from the skin and hair coat. These barbs point inward on the tongue, which causes the hair to remain lodged on the cat's tongue until it is swallowed.

Hair is mostly indigestible and therefore begins to knot up in the stomach. As the hairball enlarges, it is unable to pass out of the stomach down into the small intestine. It then becomes an irritant to the stomach lining eventually being vomited up in most cases. The vomited "hairball" is often not actually round in shape, but rather tubular.

How do I recognize vomiting?

Vomiting may begin with a stage of nausea, in which the cat appears restless, and possibly apprehensive. The cat may lick its lips, salivate, and repeatedly swallow. Occasionally, the cat might pant. Vomiting itself involves contractions of the abdominal muscles, which may be repeated, leading to expulsion of fluid, froth, food or occasionally worms. The severe effort associated with vomiting may be distressing to the cat, and they might cry out. Something as simple as a car ride can stimulate the nerves in the vomiting center of the brain.

If your cats gets car sick, talk to your vet about medications that might prevent this from happening. Cats can sometimes vomit from eating too much too fast. If you suspect this is happening to your cat, discuss it with your veterinarian. Special feeding practices/training and specially designed bowls to slow down the eating practice can be helpful in dealing with this problem.



It is important to differentiate vomiting from coughing, which is sometimes easier said than done. Cats may cough up some froth which they subsequently swallow. Cats usually crouch down on all four legs when coughing with the neck stretched out. Yellow froth (bile) usually indicates vomiting, but white froth can be either vomiting or coughing.

It is also helpful to differentiate vomiting from regurgitation, which is usually associated with problems affecting the esophagus. Features which help to differentiate vomiting from regurgitation include:

- Vomiting involves forceful abdominal contractions and regurgitation usually does not
- If the fluid contains yellow bile, it is usually vomiting rather than regurgitation
- Regurgitated fluid might be sour and fermented and mucousy but is not digested

Acute vomiting

Acute vomiting is vomiting that has been present for no more than a few days. Most cases will respond quickly to simple treatment. The cause of such cases is often never established and may be due to relatively trivial factors such as eating spoiled food, or hunting bugs or small animals. Rarely, acute vomiting might be so severe that it causes dehydration that needs to be treated with fluid therapy. In these unusual cases, a more serious underlying cause might be suspected, and further tests, specific treatment and aggressive supportive care may be required. Cats are known for playing with strings and other toys and then sometimes swallowing them, possibly causing obstruction of the intestines. Obstruction usually causes profuse vomiting, and might need to be corrected by doing surgery right away. Untreated intestinal obstructions can be fatal in some cases, so if you suspect this, see your vet right away.

Features that you may be able to identify that will help the veterinarian decide whether simple treatment or further investigations are appropriate would be:

- If the cat feels relatively well, simple treatment without tests may be sufficient. If the cat is ill, depressed or lethargic, more might need to be done
- If the cat is eating and drinking, simple treatment might be indicated
- If there has been weight loss, more tests might need to be done
- A few specks of fresh blood in the vomit may not be abnormal but more copious or persistent bleeding can be serious
- Any pain or distress, particularly affecting the abdomen suggest that tests are needed
- More frequent vomiting is often more severe than occasional vomiting.
- Mild and self limiting vomiting when the diet is changed may resolve on its own
- Whether other pets or people in the household are affected can be important

Symptomatic treatment for vomiting

Symptomatic treatment is usually tried initially in mild cases of vomiting. It may involve a number of measures:



1. Withholding of food for six to eight hours or as directed by your veterinarian.
2. Provision of an easily digested, bland diet.
3. Drugs for nausea, and possible antibiotics or dewormer.

If no vomiting occurs for 6 to 8 hours, begin to frequently give small amounts of clear liquids (water, Pedialyte, or other electrolyte solution). A rule of thumb is to give 1 teaspoon per pound of body weight every 2 or 3 hours throughout the day and night. If your pet does not vomit the fluid, the following day offer small frequent meals of boiled hamburger, chicken, or fish and white rice. If your pet does not want to eat, or continues to vomit, go to the veterinarian for medical care. If the cat is progressing well, the quantity of food offered can be gradually increased back to normal over several days and then the cat's normal diet can be reintroduced gradually over several days.

Do not administer any medications, even over-the-counter medications to your cat without talking to your veterinarian first. Drugs that are safe for people can sometimes be very toxic to cats.

Further investigation of chronic vomiting

Severe or chronic vomiting is more serious. It can lead to secondary problems, particularly dehydration and disturbances in the levels of electrolytes such as sodium. It is important to investigate such cases to identify the underlying cause so that effective treatment can be given. It may be necessary to hospitalize your cat so that fluids can be given to combat dehydration and correct any imbalances in the levels of electrolytes. In some cases, it is necessary to administer injections to control the vomiting. In less severe cases you may be asked to administer fluids and special solutions at home. If your cat fails to improve or becomes unduly distressed, contact your veterinarian for further instructions. Possible causes of chronic vomiting include parasitic infection, intestinal inflammation, food allergies or intolerances, and even cancer in some cases. Further tests are needed in order to determine the best course of action.

Additional diagnostic tests may be required in cases of chronic vomiting, when the cat has been vomiting for more than two weeks, even though the vomiting may be intermittent and the cat may appear otherwise well. Such cases can often not be successfully treated until the underlying cause has been determined. Some of the more commonly used tests are:

Blood tests - to check for infections, kidney and liver problems, thyroid disease, diabetes and provide other clues to the diagnosis. Sometimes special tests sent to a "GI Lab" will provide even more information about the intestines and pancreas, above and beyond routine bloodwork.

Fecal tests - A fecal flotation or other test might be done to detect the presence of intestinal parasites or other problems which can cause vomiting.

X-rays and/or ultrasound - may show abnormalities of the esophagus or stomach, or problems elsewhere in the body which might cause vomiting, including infection, inflammation, obstructions or tumors. It may be necessary to give barium to help identify any blockages, tumors, ulcers, foreign bodies, etc.

Endoscopy - in some cases a diagnosis can be made by viewing the inside of the stomach and upper intestine (duodenum) directly through an endoscope, a flexible viewing tube, which is passed through the mouth under a general anesthetic.

Laparotomy - in some cases an exploratory surgery is necessary, particularly if some obstruction or blockage is suspected. This may also allow surgical treatment of the problem, and allow an opportunity for diagnostic tissue samples to be taken from multiple organs.

Food Trail – Sometimes it is necessary to feed your cat a hypoallergenic food in order to rule out food allergy as a cause of vomiting. There are two basic types of hypoallergenic food: hydrolyzed diets and novel/limited antigen diets. Hydrolyzed diets break proteins down into particles so small that they are unlikely to trigger an allergic response. Novel/limited antigen diets choose protein and carbohydrate sources for the food which your cat has likely not eaten before, and it limits the number of different ingredients in the food. In order to be effective the food selected for the trial must be fed exclusively, for at least 6-8 weeks prior to assessing its effect. Blood tests are available to assess for food allergies, but they are not highly reliable. A food allergy can develop at any time, even in animals who have eaten the same diet for a long time prior to developing allergies to its ingredients.

References:

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