



CATS AND HAIRBALLS

With Hairball Awareness Day coming up on 25th April, Emily Fowler takes a look at what hairballs are and how to prevent them

We've probably all experienced the joy of our cats coughing up a hairball, especially when you only realise once you've stepped in it (bare feet optional!). Although hairballs are a common issue for cats, they can cause serious problems and there are actually ways to avoid them.

What are hairballs?

When your cat grooms itself, the hundreds of tiny hooks on its tongue, made up of keratin (the ones that make your cat's licks feel like sandpaper on your skin), catch some of the hairs as they become loose, and the hairs end up being

ingested. Your cat can't digest these hairs, so the ones that don't get passed through in its faeces end up forming a hairball in its stomach.

You'll probably notice your cat retching as it tries to cough up a hairball, and eventually a sausage shaped mass of hair, partly digested food and bile will be vomited up. Hopefully not right outside the shower while you're in it; yes, that has happened at my house! Although a hairball will be shaped like an actual ball when it's in your cat's stomach, it has to pass through your cat's oesophagus to come out, which is when it becomes the shape we see on the floor.

The types of cats most likely to have hairballs

Although all cats are individuals, and that's no different when it comes to hairballs, there are certain cats that are more likely to suffer with them.

Cats naturally shed more hair in the spring and autumn, as their fur changes to fit the seasons, but indoor cats' shedding cycles tend to be all year round because they're 'tricked' by the central heating we have in our homes. This means that indoor cats are more likely to get hairballs all year round, whereas outdoor cats are often only prone to them at certain times.

The longer your cat's hair is, the more likely that they'll suffer with hairballs, but it isn't only the length of cats' coats that affects their chances of getting hairballs. As a cat grows older, the more fastidious they become about grooming themselves, so they ingest a greater amount of hair while they're doing it. Older cats' digestive systems also begin to slow down as part of the natural ageing process, so the ingested hair is less likely to be passed through them and more likely to sit in their stomach becoming a hairball.

Two of the symptoms of feline stress - excess shedding and over-grooming - can both cause an increase in hairballs and you might also notice these signs if your cat is ill. If you notice your cat over-

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grooming, a visit to the vet is in order to rule out any underlying health issues.

How to prevent your cat getting hairballs

The best way to prevent hairballs is to groom your cat regularly and thoroughly enough to remove any loose hairs. Grooming your cat isn't only a great way to prevent hairballs, it's also a really lovely way of bonding. Even if your cat doesn't seem keen at first, once you get into a routine, you'll find that most cats enjoy the attention and the feeling of being groomed.

There are a number of cat foods on the market that are advertised to reduce hairballs and they tend to contain more fibre which helps to improve your cat's digestion and coat condition, while minimising shedding. There are also hairball remedies available that may help to lubricate hairballs and make them easier to pass through your cat's digestive system but, as with anything, always check with your vet before you try a product or change your cat's diet, to make sure that it's suitable for them.

If you have a cat that overgrooms, work with your vet to try to establish the cause so you can deal with it. You can also try to distract your cat with playtime when you notice overgrooming happening.

Hairballs might be unpleasant for both you and your cat when they appear but if a hairball isn't passed through their system or vomited up, it can cause a serious obstruction.

Tips for better grooming to reduce hairballs

- Frequency depending on your cat's hair length – daily for long-haired cats and weekly for short-haired cats
- Grooming is especially important in spring and autumn as your cat is more likely to shed
- Choose a suitable brush or comb depending on your cat's hair length and preferences
- Start gently, and watch your cat's body language to find out what it does and doesn't like
- Incorporate grooming into your usual routine

Symptoms of hairball blockages

If your cat has a hairball stuck in its throat, stomach or intestines, it will be at best uncomfortable and at worst cause a severe health problem. If your cat seems to be choking, retching or vomiting for a period of time without passing a hairball, it may be because a hairball is stuck in its throat. A hairball that's stuck inside your cat will often cause constipation or diarrhoea, lethargy and a lack of appetite all, of course, symptoms of other illnesses as well. If you notice a change in your cat's behaviour or general health, make an immediate appointment with your vet.

If it does turn out to be a blockage caused by hairballs, your vet will be able to suggest a suitable treatment, which could mean surgery to remove the blockage. 🐾

