

## Hairballs: A Messy Nuisance or Red Flag Alert?

If you're owned by an indoor kitty, chances are you've cleaned up more than a few hairballs. What causes these annoying 'deposits' and should you be concerned if they happen regularly? Know the underlying conditions that can contribute to hairballs and how to help healthy cats avoid them.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Hairballs in indoor cats, while common, can signal an underlying medical issue; a kitty who regularly produces hairballs should be seen by a veterinarian to determine the cause
- In cats with a clean bill of health, hairballs are most often the result of simply ingesting too much hair and/or a dry (kibble), low moisture diet
- Healthy kitties with hairballs need help with grooming chores along with a moisture-rich diet containing added fiber, digestive enzymes, and other supplements as appropriate
- A petroleum-free hairball remedy or a dab of coconut oil on your cat's paw can also help reduce hairball frequency

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If you're a cat parent unacquainted with hairballs (scientific name: trichobezoars), consider yourself lucky, because unfortunately, the gross little piles of yuck are fairly commonplace — especially in homes with long-haired kitties.

For those of you unfamiliar with hairballs, they're actually more of a cylindrical shape than a ball, tend to be slimy or phlegm-covered, and are usually the same color as the little darling who coughed them up. Hairballs are sometimes mistaken for cat poop, but on closer inspection it's usually easy to tell a hairball from a misplaced litterbox deposit.

### Frequent Hairballs Often Signal an Underlying Problem

Because hairballs are relatively common in today's kitties, many pet parents and even veterinarians assume they're a normal part of being feline. The rationalization is that because cats routinely groom themselves and swallow fur in the process, it's natural for them to develop hairballs. However, the feline digestive tract is actually built to handle a certain amount of fur — the fur ingested during grooming, as well as the fur attached to prey in the wild.

Indoor-only cats in particular develop hairballs due to coat length, shedding patterns (spring is often hairball season for kitties whose coats thin out as the weather warms up), excessive grooming (of themselves or other cats in the household), deficiencies in the diet, digestive dysfunction, or a combination of issues.

When one or more of these situations occurs, the hair your cat has ingested forms a mass in her stomach that can't pass easily into the intestines. Her body knows it must rid itself of the foreign object, which is why hairballs are often thrown up rather than winding up as poop in the litterbox.

## Risk Factors for Hairballs

Most hairballs are the result of too much ingested hair, a moisture-deficient diet (or other issues with biologically inappropriate foods) and/or a problem in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. Long-haired cats tend to have more hairball issues than kitties with shorter coats simply because they have more hair.

Skin conditions caused by allergies, infections or parasites can cause excessive shedding or over-grooming. Excessive grooming, also called **psychogenic alopecia**, is a compulsive disorder in cats that can result in impressive quantities of ingested hair.

Cats fed kibble, especially if it's the only food they eat, aren't getting nearly the moisture their organs need to function properly, and unlike dogs, they're not likely to make up the difference at the water bowl. A GI tract that is moisture-depleted is less able to transport a hairball than the digestive tract of a well-hydrated cat eating a moisture-rich, species-specific diet. Raw, gently cooked or canned foods all provide substantially more moisture than dry food.

Cats consuming feed grade (not human grade) diets are ingesting poor quality ingredients that have been rendered and processed at extremely high temperatures, which dramatically impacts nutrient value.

Digestibility of poor-quality proteins used in "pet feed" is not measured, nor are the levels of toxic byproducts (e.g., advanced glycation end products and heterocyclic amines), pesticides (glyphosate), or genetically modified ingredients, all which have been linked to impaired gut health and microbiome imbalances.

A digestive tract compromised by an inflammatory condition like inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), parasites, foreign objects, cancer, or another serious dis-order may not be able to process even normal amounts of hair. Chronic hairball issues should be investigated by a veterinarian, since there could be an underlying disease requiring treatment.

Once in a great while a hairball can grow large enough to be life-threatening and require surgical removal. If you're not seeing hairballs but your cat is exhibiting all the usual hairball-related noises and behaviors, you should get him to your vet right away, as it's possible a hairball has grown too big to be regurgitated or passed through the GI tract.

It could also be a non-hairball related but serious condition like feline asthma. If your cat vomits frequently, stops eating, loses weight or shows other symptoms of being ill or in pain, it's also time to get her to the veterinarian.

## How to Help Your Cat Avoid Hairballs

- **Brush or comb your cat** — How much of this you'll need to do depends a great deal on the type and texture of your cat's fur, as well as his age, lifestyle and health status. Some coats never develop so much as a tangle, while others become matted overnight. Generally speaking, the longer, softer and silkier the coat, the more upkeep it requires.

Older cats may lose interest in grooming themselves, especially if they're experiencing age-related cognitive decline (kitty dementia). Overweight kitties often have a difficult time grooming the back half of their bodies,

including the area right under the tail where bits of poop and litter can stick to long hair.

Kitties with "pushed in" faces, known as brachycephalic breeds (Persians and Himalayans, for example), often need the area around their eyes cleaned to prevent tear staining and infections in the folds of the skin.

It's a good idea for any owner of a long-haired cat to prepare to spend some time helping their pet with grooming chores. Your kitty's coat may only need some TLC once a month, or you may need to tend to it daily to both prevent hairballs and keep your cat looking and feeling good. Fortunately, many kitties absolutely love being brushed or combed, and many who are initially hesitant can learn to enjoy the process as well.

Set a goal of 5 minutes a day with a long-haired cat and 3 to 4 times a week for a kitty with short hair. You should notice a very quick improvement in the hairball situation, and regular brushing or combing will also help improve the condition of your pet's skin by removing debris and dead cells.

- **Feed a nutritionally optimal, species-specific, moisture rich diet made with excellent quality human grade ingredients** — If your cat is eating exclusively dry food and you can't or aren't willing to switch to a different diet, I recommend adding bone broth to the kibble.
- **Add a fiber source to your cat's meals** — Mix the contents of a capsule of psyllium seed husk powder with a tablespoon of water and stir it into the food, add a pinch of coconut fiber to each meal, or try a teaspoon of 100% canned pumpkin or freshly cooked mashed pumpkin.
- **Add an omega-3 supplement such as krill oil** — Sufficient omega-3 fatty acids in the diet can help improve the condition of your cat's skin and fur, as well as the ability of his digestive system to manage the hair and debris he swallows while grooming himself.
- **Add a high-quality digestive enzyme to your cat's diet** — Cats in the wild consume raw food, which contains natural enzymes not found in highly processed, commercial feline diets.
- **Never use petroleum jelly or mineral oil for hairballs** — If you must use medication to assist with the passage of hair, use a petroleum-free hairball remedy (look for an all-natural product made with slippery elm, marshmallow or papaya) or a dab of coconut oil on your cat's front paw or near her bowl.

I also recommend fiber and coconut oil together. Kibble fed cats, in particular, need additional GI lubrication to help ingested hair pass through the digestive tract.

## Sources and References

[PetMD July 30, 2020 \(Archived\)](#)

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