

Are Hairballs Affecting Your Cat's Well-Being?

They appear nasty, but hairballs are a natural part of living with a feline family member. However, if you notice that your kitty is vomiting more hairballs than usual, they may need your help — try these strategies to minimize hairball formation.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Hairballs are common in cats due to their grooming habits. While usually harmless, excessive hairballs cause discomfort and digestive issues if not managed properly
- Cats swallow fur while grooming, which often passes through their digestive system. However, accumulated fur in the stomach forms hairballs that are vomited out
- Signs of excessive hairballs include litterbox issues, lack of appetite and lethargy. Long-haired breeds and cats that overgroom due to stress are more prone to hairballs
- Addressing overgrooming and providing a moisture-rich, nutrient-dense diet are crucial steps in preventing excessive hairball formation in cats
- Regular brushing, adding fiber and omega-3s to the diet, using digestive enzymes, and avoiding petroleum-based products help reduce hairball issues in cats

Many cat parents know this dilemma all too well — whenever their furry feline friends spend a lot of time grooming themselves, sooner or later they'll cough up what looks like a hairy, slimy, saliva-covered tubular mass on the floor. These are what's called hairballs or trichobezoars.

While they appear gross, hairballs are a common part of living with cats. But harmless as they may seem, if not controlled these can lead to unpleasant circumstances and cause discomfort in your pet. This article will shed light on why hairballs form and what you must do to prevent them from harming your kitty.

Why Do Hairballs Form?

Cats are obsessive groomers — they just love to keep themselves clean and can spend hours on end licking and cleaning their fur. However, this habit causes them to swallow excessive amounts of fur in the process. This is because cats have a unique tongue structure, with a rough surface containing tiny, hook-like formations that “catch” loose hair.

As a result, your kitty swallows their own fur — usually a lot of it — where it goes to their stomach and the digestive tract without being processed or digested. In most cases, the cat hair passes out from your feline friend's body with ease, through their poop; but sometimes, they usually remain in the stomach, where they accumulate and form hairballs. Your cat will then vomit the hairball — often covered with slimy mucus — to eliminate it from its system.

Despite the name, however, hairballs aren't round; they're more often tubular, due to the shape of your cat's digestive system, specifically their esophagus. However, Richard Goldstein, DVM, an associate professor of small animal medicine at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, says that a hairball that isn't disgorged and remains in the stomach will indeed be round, appearing "like a sponge or a rolled-up sock"¹ — and therein lies the problem.

Signs Your Cat Has Ingested Too Many Hairballs

Although cats' digestive tracts are built to handle a certain amount of fur, and they are designed to eliminate the fur ingested through their vomit, there is still a risk that hairballs form too frequently or grow too large. When this happens, the hairball can grow too large to pass through the narrow sphincters in the esophagus or stomach. They can also become stuck in the small intestine and lead to a blockage.

As a result of these excessive hairballs, your cat can experience great discomfort. These blockages can also lead to digestive problems. Several signs that your cat has too many hairballs inside their body include:

- Litterbox issues, such as diarrhea or constipation
- Lack of appetite
- Lethargy

Addressing Overgrooming and Your Cat's Diet Is the First Step to Keep Hairballs from Forming

As you've probably expected, long-haired cat breeds like Persians and Maine Coons are more prone to getting hairballs because they have more hair.² And while all cats tend to form hairballs, there are other health factors that contribute to their risk.

One is overgrooming — cats that are bored or anxious are more likely to groom themselves incessantly. Certain conditions that trigger discomfort, such as allergies, infections or parasites, can also cause your cat to groom themselves more than usual.

Some cats also suffer from what's called psychogenic alopecia — this is a displacement behavior that occurs as a stress response. This usually happens when there's a change in your cat's environment. Your cat grooms to curb the emotional tension they are dealing with.

Another potential trigger is a moisture- and nutrient-deficient diet. Cats that are mostly fed kibble aren't getting sufficient moisture needed by their organs to work properly, and unlike dogs they do not compensate by drinking more water. Feeding a commercial pet food diet that is rendered and processed at very high temperatures also affects the nutrient value, leading to poor nutrient content. As a result, their GI tract becomes depleted of nutrients and moisture, making it less likely to transport hairballs.

Hence, addressing these two primary factors will go a long way toward preventing hairballs in cats. If you see any health conditions that trigger your cat to overgroom, consult with your vet to help resolve it. To ease their stress, introduce cat towers, interactive toys and playtime sessions to keep them busy and entertained.

As for their diet, make sure to feed a nutritionally optimal, species-specific diet that's rich in moisture and made using excellent quality human-grade ingredients. If you cannot make the shift from kibble, try adding bone broth to their kibble to give more moisture to their diet.

How to Reduce Hairballs from Harming Your Cat's Health

While you cannot completely keep your cats from developing hairballs, there are ways to reduce their chances of forming. In addition to the tips above, these strategies can also boost your cat's overall health:

- **Brush your cat's hair regularly** — This depends on the texture and type of fur your cat has. Generally, cats with softer, silkier fur need more attention. Ideally, long-haired cats should be brushed at least five minutes a day, while short-haired breeds will be fine with three to four brushing sessions per week. If you have an older kitty, you may need to pay more attention to them, as they may lose interest in grooming themselves.
- **Add more fiber to your kitty's diet** — This will help their GI tract move and eliminate hairballs from their body. Psyllium fiber husk powder, coconut fiber or freshly cooked mashed pumpkin are some top sources.
- **Give them more omega-3s** — Healthy omega-3 fats improve the health of your cat's fur and skin and support their digestive system's ability to eliminate the hair and debris that are ingested.
- **Add a high-quality digestive enzyme to your cat's diet** — Processed, commercial feline diets are usually lacking these digestive enzymes.
- **Never use petroleum jelly or mineral oil to help pass hairballs** — Instead, use an all-natural product, such as marshmallow, slippery elm, papaya or coconut oil.

Sources and References

¹ [4 Paws Veterinary Care, Hairballs in Cats: Causes, Symptoms, and What You Can Do About Them](#)

² [Covertrus Great Pet Care, August 21, 2024](#)
