

The vomiting cat-“Isn’t it just hairballs, Doc?”

Have you ever known a cat that doesn’t occasionally throw up? I haven’t. It’s interesting how nonchalant we are about our cats losing their lunch. I can only begin to wonder what my physician would say if I told him I was “paying homage to the porcelain god” several times a month. Something tells me he’d want to run a few tests!

As common as vomiting is in cats, it may be wise to pay a little closer attention to their habits. I’m not suggesting that we worry a lot about the cat that occasionally vomits; maybe 1-2 times a month. What concerns me is the feline who cannot hold on to its meal several times a month, especially if the frequency of vomiting is steadily increasing. Add in intermittent poor appetite, diarrhea, and gradual weight loss and I’m going to want to run a few tests.

Many things can cause vomiting in cats. For reasons I haven’t figured out yet, everyone first wants to blame hairballs. Who started this theory? Granted, cats will ingest lots of hair; this results from their aggressive grooming habits. And yes, cats will accumulate aggregates of this hair in their stomachs and vomit them in neat little, easy to clean up packets we call hairballs (there is actually a medical term for hairballs- Trichobezors). But the problem is folks will often assume that the vomiting is a result of the hairball causing some kind of obstruction in the intestinal tract, and they try to lube things up by giving products like Cat Lax®, or Laxatone® which are just flavored petroleum lubricants. This may work sometimes, but I suspect that there is rarely a true obstruction of the gastro-intestinal tract. More likely the accumulating hairball in the stomach somehow triggers the stomach to “clean house” once in awhile resulting in vomition of a hairball-unfortunately it usually happens on the kitchen floor or fine oriental rug just as company is arriving.

When vomiting becomes more frequent, say 3-4 times each month, it is probably wise not to immediately invoke the “Hairball Theory”. Rather, have your cat looked over by your veterinarian. Frequent vomiting can be a symptom of a whole host of illnesses that many times can be treated or at least controlled.

The most common cause of repeated vomiting in cats in our practice is actually a complex of three illnesses: Pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas organ), Inflammatory Bowel Disease (inflammation of the intestines), and Cholangiohepatitis (bacterial infection of the liver and bile producing tissues of the liver). Cats can have one, two or all three of these illnesses at the same time. In fact many veterinarians now refer to this complex of diseases as one illness called “Tri-iditis”.

Diagnosis of “Tri-iditis” requires blood and urine testing, and possibly x-rays, ultrasound (sonogram), and the use of an endoscope to look at, and biopsy, the intestinal lining. Treatment may require a stay in the hospital, but not in every case. The important thing is an early and accurate diagnosis so therapy can be more effective.

Ingestion of foreign objects and toxins, intestinal cancer, and advanced diseases of the kidney system can also cause frequent vomiting in cats. These problems can often be ruled out with the diagnostic tools just mentioned.

Unfortunately vomiting is a very non-specific symptom in cats. I’ve only mentioned a few of the common feline illnesses that may show vomiting as a symptom. If your cat is vomiting more than just occasionally, or if the vomiting is associated with any other signs of illness, don’t delay, have your feline friend checked out by your

veterinarian. Remember, it's OK to apply the "What if" rule: What if I had the same symptoms of frequent vomiting that my cat has? Would my doctor want to see me? I'm sure the answer would be yes.