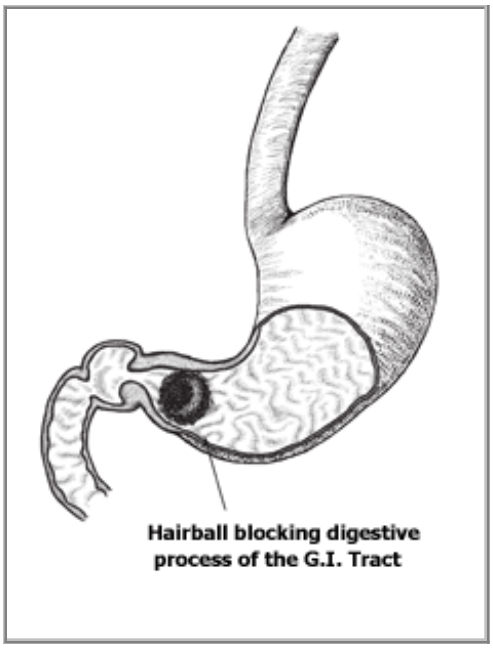
Hairballs Cause Vomiting, not Coughing

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Q. My cat gets hairballs a lot. How can I fix this problem?

A. Since cats spend so much time licking and cleaning themselves, they swallow a lot of hair. Hairballs, or 'fur balls' are quantities of hair that accumulate in the cat's stomach or small intestine. Normally, most of the hair that is swallowed is expelled through the cat's digestive system in her stool. Problems occur when hair that does not get excreted gathers in the cat's stomach or intestine and forms a dense ball or mat which cannot be passed. The ball is then vomited.



The signs of hairballs in cats, then, are related to the digestive system and include vomiting, loss of appetite, or constipation. Hairballs are actually one of the most common reasons that cats vomit. The 'hacking' you may notice when your cat is bringing up a hairball may be gagging or retching, as the cat tries to vomit the hairball. Hairballs do not cause respiratory symptoms.

While it is normal for a cat to have them occasionally, large numbers of hairballs are dangerous. Hairballs can block the intestinal tract, making it impossible for the cat to either vomit or eliminate. Twenty-five percent of all impactions (when something is 'stuck' in the digestive tract) diagnosed by veterinarians are due to hairballs. There have been cases where hairballs the size of baseballs were removed from the stomachs of cats.

Signs of a major hairball problem and possible impaction are retching, inability to defecate, diarrhea, loss of appetite, or a swollen abdomen. See your veterinarian immediately if you suspect your cat is impacted.

Products on the market that can help cats with a hairball problem are usually composed of non-digestible oil-type ingredients and are flavored so a cat will accept them readily. They work by lubricating the cat's digestive tract to help the hair pass more easily. If this is done routinely, large mats or balls never form. Make sure to follow the manufacturer's recommendations for use.

We do not suggest you use homemade products containing butter or oils, because

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they can bring about other digestive problems or be absorbed by the cat's system before they have a chance to work.

A high-fiber diet or fiber supplement may also help with a chronic hairball problem. The fiber can help move the excess hair through the cat's digestive system and into the litter pan. Whichever product you choose, use it on a regular basis, according to the manufacturer's recommendations, to prevent reoccurrence.

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