

My cat coughs up hairballs once or twice a week. He seems fine otherwise. I always thought that it was normal, but since it is getting a little more frequent I wanted to make sure.

Almost every cat is going to bring up a hairball at some point in his life. If you are nearby, you will may hear the familiar retching sound, or find the evidence at some later time as a hot dog shaped mass of hair on the floor. Although the term “coughing up a hairball” is generally used, actually your cat is vomiting. There may be some hacking noises made in the process that sound like a cough, but the hair is coming from the stomach and not the lungs. While hairballs used to be considered normal in our pet cats, more recent findings suggest that repeated hairballs are not normal and indicate a problem.

It’s easy to figure out where hairballs come from. Cats like to groom themselves and their rough little tongues collect a lot of hair that is swallowed. This hair should pass through the intestinal tract and out through the stool. Large amounts of hair that don’t pass, are the source of hairballs and the cause of your cat’s attempts to get rid of them by vomiting. In rare cases, large amounts of hair over time can become lodged in the stomach and require surgical removal. This serious consequence is termed a trichobezoar.

Since your cat is bringing up hairballs so frequently it is time to try to figure out the cause. In some cases there is excessive grooming that results in large amounts of hair ingested. Excessive grooming can be a result of itchy skin from allergies or fleas, stress and emotional causes of over grooming, or licking over painful areas such as the site of an arthritic joint or over the abdomen when there is a painful bladder or intestinal tract. Aside from ingestion of too much hair, the problem could be due to a motility problem in the intestinal tract that is preventing even small amounts of hair from passing through normally. Tests will need to be done to rule out esophageal problems, obstructions, parasites, cancer, hernias and other factors that reduce the normal forward motion of the intestinal contents.

Although more frequent brushing, along with a change in diet, or the addition of fiber may help prevent the occasional hairball, once they become frequent, treating the underlying cause will provide a long-term solution.

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