

My cat is 6 years old and has always had hairballs. It happens a few times a month. I give him hairball treats every day but it doesn't seem to help. Is this normal for a cat?

For a long time cat owners would tell their veterinarians that their cat was vomiting up hairballs and if the cat seemed fine between the episodes and wasn't losing weight, we wouldn't be too alarmed.

Sometimes hairball medications (petroleum jelly based) or treats or increased fiber in the diet would be offered and might make a difference. We now have more information that leads us to believe that hairballs occurring more often than a few times a year, especially in short-haired cats, are a sign of a more serious problem.

In November 2013 results of a study of 100 cats in a clinical practice were published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association. These cats had one or more of the following symptoms: vomiting more than twice a month for three months, weight loss of over a pound in the prior six months, or diarrhea of several weeks duration.

In many cases, the cat was at the veterinarian's office for a wellness exam and the owners didn't think these symptoms were of particular concern.

Rather than making light of the symptoms, the author of the study performed an abdominal ultrasound exam on these 100 cats. If the wall of their small intestine was thicker than normal he then suggested and performed surgical biopsies of several areas of the small intestine. Results of these biopsies showed that 99 of the 100 cats had some type of small intestinal disease that could account for their gastrointestinal problems. Inflammatory bowel disease was diagnosed in 49 of the cats and 50 of the cats had cancer of the intestine. Almost all of the cancer diagnoses were lymphoma.

These results show that we should not ignore chronic vomiting or diarrhea in cats. Based on the results of intestinal biopsies, treatment can be started. If your cat has inflammatory bowel disease, treatment is usually successful with prescription or hypoallergenic diets, and in some cases medication.

There is some evidence that shows as inflammatory bowel disease continues and the wall of the intestine becomes thickened, hair is more likely to accumulate and not pass through as it should. Inflammatory bowel disease may also lead to cancer of the intestine if not treated. If the biopsy diagnosis is cancer, depending on the type, especially small cell lymphoma, it too may be successfully managed with medication.

- Francine Rattner, VMD