The ABCs of Hairballs

Hairballs are common — especially among longhaired breeds — and develop because of the way cats groom. We offer some remedies.

By Sally Deneen

It’s the sound we hope not to hear — the hacking, the gagging. Then the hairball seems to always land on the thick carpet, never on the easy-to-clean tile. Just why do cats develop hairballs? And what can owners do to reduce incidents?

Bette Choate of Davie, Florida pondered such queries many times. Her dark tiger cat named Tiffany gagged so often that Choate began to dread hearing the sound from afar: harumph, harumph, harumph.

“I feel so bad for her,” Choate says. Determined to get the hairball problem under control, Choate embarked on a laundry list of remedies. Some worked better than others did. Some get a thumbs-up from veterinarians. Others don’t. Eventually, Choate found success. Tiffany still expels hairballs, but less often. “Luckily,” Choate says, “I have a tile floor.”

How did she and other pet owners get a handle on their problems?

HAIRBALL BASICS

Hairballs are a common occurrence, particularly among longhaired breeds, and they develop because of the way cats groom. As cats lick their furry bodies, the tiny barbs on their tongues pull off excess hair. Inevitably, cats swallow hair and their stomachs can’t digest it. Ideally, the hair passes through the cat’s body and ends up in stools. But hairballs form when the hair instead accumulates in the stomach, where it can irritate the stomach lining and interfere with digestion. Once the mass reaches a critical size, the cat vomits to expel a messy wad of hair, digested food, saliva and gastric secretions, says Christine Merle, DVM, assistant dean for public engagement and clinical assistant professor at University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine.

These hacking bouts typically don’t mean a cat is ill and often are merely an annoyance for cat owners, but unexpelled hairballs can develop into a serious health problem. They can become so large that they cause blockages in the stomach or intestines. If a cat is dehydrated, particularly due to an underlying health issue, its stomach contents can become dry and form a blockage, says Dr. Merle. Mischievous cats that gobble string or Easter-basket grass can suffer from blockages as these stringy items mix with hair and minerals to form larger, compact, hard obstructions (called trichobezoars).

If the intestine becomes blocked, it is a medical emergency that requires immediate surgery. Vomiting and possibly pain would occur if the hairball was located in the stomach. Constipation would occur if the hair is in the large intestine, or colon.

Some hairballs can be removed by first administering anesthesia to the cat and inserting a scoping tool into its mouth and down its digestive tract to retrieve the mass of hair. However, surgery in which a veteri-
narian makes an incision into the abdomen and/or stomach or intestines, is sometimes necessary.

Marni Bellavia of Sunrise, Florida learned the hard way about an unusual emergency that can arise when hairballs are left untreated. Princess, her Himalayan ragdoll, required surgery to remove a hairy mass that became lodged in an airway during retching, causing the cat to gasp for air. Upon further examination via an X-ray, a veterinarian discovered — and soon removed — additional hairy clusters inside the stomach of this rescued stray cat.

“I was so freaked out,” says Bellavia, who feared Princess would choke to death. Once Princess was pronounced good as new, Bellavia feared an eventual scary repeat if she didn’t somehow reduce her cat’s hairball tendencies.

Such emergencies “fortunately are quite rare, but they can happen. The vast majority of the time, hairballs are very simple problems,” says Linda A. Ross, DVM, MS, Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine and associate professor in the Department of Clinical Sciences at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine. She remembers one feline patient, however, that arrived at the Tufts clinic every year or two to surgically remove hairballs that were “three or four inches across.”

REMEDIES AND PREVENTION

Like Choate, Bellavia embarked on a campaign to get her cat’s hairball problem under control. No single remedy helps all cats, so solving a situation often becomes a process of trial and error.

Good regular brushings are an important basic step, even for short-haired cats, Dr. Ross advises. Brushings reduce the amount of hair cats swallow. Rubber curry brushes are excellent for removing loose hair and dead skin cells, according to the Humane Society of the United States, which advises daily brushings. For cats that hate brushes, nub-covered grooming gloves are a good alternative; just stroke the cat gently.

Members of the American Animal Hospital Association suggest weekly brushings may be enough to keep the coats of shorthaired cats in good order.

But brushing alone rarely is enough.

Bellavia brushed her ragdoll routinely even before Princess required surgical removal of her hairballs, so Bellavia tried a new grooming tactic after surgery: Longhaired Princess began monthly treks to a groomer for a haircut.

“After that, my Himalayan ragdoll looked like a lion,” Bellavia says.

Some longhaired cats benefit from being shaved down by a groomer, concurs Atlanta cat specialist Drew Weigner, DVM, diplomate of the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners and past president of the Academy of Feline Medicine. “While this definitely changes their appearance,” he says, “the effect can be quite pleasing, making them look like little lions.”

Intestinal lubricants, such as Laxatone, are a popular second basic step to employ to help hairballs pass through the digestive tract. Some cats seem to consider the ritual a treat because the gels come in pleasing flas-
vors such as tuna or malt. Colloquially called a hairball “laxative,” such petroleum-based gels are sold at pet-supply stores and aren’t actually laxatives. “It won’t cause diarrhea if used frequently,” Dr. Weigner assures.

DOWNSIDE OF HAIRBALL GELS
Many cat owners may find success with just those two basic steps — regular brushings and intestinal lubricants. But Bellavia didn’t. Princess used a lubricant for at least three months before she required surgical removal of her hairballs. Choate’s cat, Tiffany, enjoyed her malt-flavored lubricant, Petromalt, well enough, but it alone wasn’t enough to lick her problem.

“The biggest problems with intestinal lubricants are not using enough each time or not using it frequently enough,” Dr. Weigner finds.

In almost all cases, the most effective dose is giving a cat a two-inch strip from the tube of lubricant twice daily for two days, Dr. Weigner says. Yet, “this is far more than indicated on the label. For cats that like the taste, giving them an inch every day or two will prevent hairballs. If they don’t, just give the above dose for two days. When hairballs return, repeat the initial dose.”

When all else fails, intestinal lubricants can be given along with a prescribed drug called Metoclopramide, which facilitates emptying of the stomach, Dr. Weigner says.

“Generally, hairballs should be resolved within 48 hours with this regimen,” he adds. “If not, either the problem is not hairballs, or a hairball is lodged and may need to be removed surgically.”

Choate didn’t opt for a prescription drug, but instead tried a few home remedies in hopes of controlling Tiffany’s hairball problem. She gave her cat a one-quarter teaspoon of plain petroleum jelly daily for a few days but it didn’t work.

Choate next tried a daily pat of margarine, but Tiffany still hacked up two or three hairballs a week.

Dr. Ross recommends avoiding home remedies, especially mineral oil. “It can be dangerous,” Dr. Ross says of mineral oil. “You don’t want to give your cat a liquid oil like mineral oil or baby oil directly in the mouth.”

“Regular mineral oil is tasteless and an animal can accidentally aspirate it,” agrees Cory Langston, DVM, PhD, Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Clinical Pharmacology and service chief of community practice at Mississippi State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine.

Cats tend to inhale such nondescript oils into their lungs. That’s because the oils are practically flavorless and, as such, don’t signal that they’re edible, Dr. Ross points out.

Choate says she eventually found success by feeding Tiffany a mixture of two brands of commercially prepared “hairball diet” cat food, which are higher-fiber foods intended to help cats pass hairballs in their stools.

“Now she’s doing fine. She has maybe one hairball every three weeks,” Choate reports.

Dr. Weigner has found mixed results from “hairball diets,” adding that, to his knowledge, no independent studies on the foods’ effectiveness have been conducted. “I have recommended other high-fiber diets, again with limited success.”

HAIRBALL DIETS CAN WORK
Higher-fiber diets obviously can increase a cat’s fecal output, Dr. Merle cautions. Plus, “hairball treatments don’t guarantee that your cat will never have a hairball. It should just reduce both the frequency and the size of these hairballs.”

Still, Dr. Merle recommends trying commercial hairball-diet foods or treats before opting for home remedies. That’s mainly because the foods fulfill a cat’s balanced nutritional requirements and are specially formulated by animal nutritionists.

“This doesn’t mean that home remedies don’t always work,” Dr. Merle says, “but trying multiple home remedies may not always provide resolution to the problem.”

In the end, you need to be prepared to go through a process of trial and error on behalf of your cat — and don’t give up. Eventually, Choate succeeded, despite what sometimes seemed like dismal odds. Looking back, Choate says: “I tried everything.”

HOW TO REMOVE HAIRBALL STAINS FROM CARPET
Cleaning hairball stains from carpet is relatively easy, says Atlanta cat specialist Drew Weigner, DVM, diplomate of the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners and past president of the Academy of Feline Medicine.

Since cats are either vomiting undigested food or a tube-shaped mass of hair, the mess is relatively dry. “Even in problem situations, the material can usually be vacuumed up after it dries,” says Dr. Weigner.

Some other tips: Gently pick up solid material with a spoon. Blot up any liquid — don’t scrub — by using a clean white cloth or paper towel. Once blotted, cover the stain with a damp white towel, place a steam iron over it for 20 to 30 seconds, then remove the iron to check the towel for any transfer of dye, advises Bissell Homecare, Inc. (www.bissell.com).

Repeat until dye is no longer visible on the towel. Rinse the stained area with hot water. Apply an enzyme-producing agent in a pet-stain removing product. Cover with a damp towel to keep moist for at least 24 hours.