Hairballs and Hairball Gastritis

If you are a cat you will occasionally vomit up hair or hairballs. This is because cats are avid groomers. Cat's tongues have bristles that are angled backwards. This is an adaptation to increase surface area to capture more water when they drink, to aid in eating prey and to aid in grooming. However, it does mean that cats have difficulty spitting things out, like hair in their mouths and they must continue to swallow it. If a cat has normal gastrointestinal motility this should not cause any drastic problems other then the occasional hairball.

Some diets on the market are supplemented with agents that will help move hair along and prevent problem hairballs. There are also tasty hairball remedies that work wonderfully given once to twice a week as a preventative. These remedies usually contain petroleum or mineral oil or both and are often fortified with minerals and vitamins. Other ways to reduce the amount of hairballs your cat experiences is to groom him or her with a comb or brush for a minute or two every day to remove loose hair from his or her coat. This will significantly reduce the amount of hair your cat is ingesting. Our favorite comb for the job is a flea comb which has tight metal prongs and is excellent for picking up those loose hairs.

Hairball incidence is increased under certain circumstances. The most common being spring and early summer when cats are losing their winter coats and ingesting more then average amounts of hair during this time. Next to that that would be overgrooming due to fleas or other skin conditions. Some cats will overgroom due to painful ailments like arthritis, kidney stones, anal gland impactions, bladder infections or stones for example. Cats will lose more hair under periods or stress like home renovations or a move for example. Many cats will also groom more then usual during these periods if they are anxious (others may groom less). When cats are unwell for any reason they typically will groom less, sometimes not at all and when they are well again will start to groom and ingest more then normal amounts of loose hairs. For this reason, if your cat has been sick and not grooming, it is important to do extra brushing or combing to help once he is well again to help prevent problem hairballs.

Hairballs can cause serious illness in some cats. If a cat has ingested a large amount of hair it may have difficulty passing out of the stomach into the small intestine. Likewise it may be difficult to vomit it up once it becomes sizeable, though the cat will continue to try. The hair will cause irritation in the lining of the stomach causing gastritis. Eventually the cat will vomit after eating and may eventually stop eating if he is unable to get rid of the hair. Many of these cats will become dehydrated and very ill and will require veterinary help which may include hospitalization and IV fluids. Endoscopy in some of these cats sometimes reveals large golfball size hairballs in their stomachs.

If your kitty is eating well and is otherwise bright and alert and active, but is vomiting periodically over several days, chances are he has a hairball. As long as he is continuing to eat and be well, the best remedy will likely be to start a good quality hairball remedy ( we like laxatone and toniclax best for this) 1 teaspoon daily for 3 consecutive days, start brushing your cat's coat regularly and continue the hairball remedy weekly to biweekly afterward. If vomiting persists or at any time he becomes inappetant or subdued then seeking veterinary attention immediately is warranted.
Cats with frequent hairballs may have GI motility issues. These cats also generally are more prone to dental problems due to acid erosion of the teeth enamel.