

# **HAIRBALLS IN CATS**

Hairballs, which are spit up, are a common problem seen in cats. Accumulation of hair in the stomach of the cat is a direct result of the significant portion of the cat's life that is spent grooming itself. It has been estimated that cats groom themselves for up to 1/3 of their waking hours.

The problem begins as the cat swallows the hair it has licked off during the cleaning process. The barb-like projections on the cat's tongue pull the hair loose from the skin and haircoat. These barbs point inward on the tongue, which causes the hair to remain lodged on the cat's tongue until it is swallowed.

Hair is mostly undigestible and therefore begins to knot up in the stomach. As the hairball enlarges, it is unable to pass out of the stomach down into the small intestine. It then becomes an irritant to the stomach lining eventually being vomited up in most cases. Should the hairball get so large that it cannot pass back up through the opening into the esophagus, it becomes a surgical procedure to get it out.

Signs of "hairballs" include vomiting, constipation, listlessness, and coughing. It frequently causes a loss of appetite and even depression. The regurgitated "hairball" is often not actually round in shape, but rather "tubular."

Finding regurgitated hairballs is a definite sign that your cat has a problem and needs help. Although rarely fatal, hairballs are an inconvenience to cleanup, very uncomfortable for the cat, and can lead to serious complications.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREVENTING HAIRBALLS:**

1. Daily brushing of the cat to remove loose hair is the best prevention. Longhaired breeds especially need special attention. During the spring when all cats shed, daily brushing is most important. After brushing, wipe the cat's haircoat with a damp towel to remove loose hair.
2. Medications are available to eliminate hairballs and help prevent recurrence. The best product available is a dietary fiber supplement (Vetasyll®) which can be added to the cat's food to aid in the elimination of accumulated hair. Laxatives in the form of pastes, or even petroleum jelly, have been recommended for many years. There are many different brands available that will be readily accepted by the cat. It is usually recommended the gel be rubbed on the cat's mouth, nose, or even on its feet. It will then be swallowed during the cat's normal grooming process.