

Vomiting in Cats Is Never Normal

Many people assume it's normal for cats to vomit occasionally, especially if they're bringing up a hairball. In reality, **there is no amount of chronic or recurring vomiting that should be considered normal.** Even when your cat consistently vomits hairballs, it should not be dismissed as harmless.

Hairball vomiting is **not** a normal part of being a cat. At the very least, frequent hairball vomiting suggests decreased gastrointestinal (GI) motility—the digestive tract is not moving food and hair through the intestines as efficiently as it should. This may be caused by a primary gastrointestinal disorder or by another underlying medical condition.

If your cat vomits on a regular basis, it's important to determine the cause rather than simply treating the symptom.

Vomiting vs. Regurgitation: Knowing the Difference

The first step is determining whether your cat is **vomiting** or **regurgitating**. Although they may appear similar, they are very different processes with different causes.

Vomiting

Vomiting is an **active** process. It involves coordinated contractions of the abdominal muscles and relaxation of the muscular sphincters of the stomach and esophagus to forcefully expel material from the stomach or small intestine.

Most cats show warning signs before vomiting, including:

- Repeated abdominal contractions
- Audible retching or heaving
- Drooling
- Lip licking
- Other signs of nausea

Vomited material may include:

- Clear fluid
- Yellow or bile-stained fluid
- Foam
- Partially or fully digested food
- A combination of these materials

Regurgitation

Regurgitation is a **passive** process in which food or fluid is expelled from the esophagus before it reaches the stomach. Unlike vomiting, there is usually no nausea, retching, or abdominal effort beforehand.

A common cause is eating too quickly, resulting in a large food bolus that cannot pass easily into the stomach. Regurgitation often occurs immediately after eating.

Regurgitated material is typically:

- Undigested food
- Often tubular in shape (matching the shape of the esophagus)
- Frequently eaten again by the cat

Because vomiting and regurgitation have different causes, distinguishing between them helps your veterinarian choose the most appropriate diagnostic and treatment plan.

Why Is Your Cat Vomiting?

Once you've determined that your cat is truly vomiting rather than regurgitating, the next step is identifying the underlying cause.

In general, vomiting falls into two broad categories:

- **Gastrointestinal disease**
- **Non-gastrointestinal (systemic) disease**

Diagnosing the Cause

Your veterinarian will begin with a detailed medical history and a thorough physical examination. Important information includes:

- How long the vomiting has been occurring
- How often it happens
- What the vomit looks like
- Diet and treats
- Appetite and weight changes
- Exposure to foreign objects or toxins
- Recent stress or environmental changes

Depending on your cat's age, symptoms, and examination findings, diagnostic testing may include:

- Complete blood count (CBC)
- Blood chemistry panel
- Thyroid testing (especially in cats over 5 years of age)
- FeLV/FIV testing for young or previously untested cats
- Fasted gastrointestinal panel (cobalamin, folate, TLI, and fPLI)
- Heartworm antigen testing (heartworm disease can cause vomiting in cats)
- Urinalysis
- Fecal testing for parasites
- Chest and abdominal X-rays
- Abdominal ultrasound
- Endoscopy or gastrointestinal biopsies when indicated

Common Causes of Vomiting

The most likely causes often vary with a cat's age.

Young to Middle-Aged Cats

In younger cats, vomiting is most commonly caused by gastrointestinal disease, including:

- Gastrointestinal obstruction from swallowed foreign objects
- Acute gastroenteritis caused by dietary indiscretion or mild foreign material passing through the digestive tract
- Acute pancreatitis
- Chronic enteropathy, most commonly inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)
- Less commonly, intestinal small-cell lymphoma

Cats may also develop **triaditis**, a condition involving simultaneous inflammation of the intestines, pancreas, and hepatobiliary system (liver and gallbladder). Intestinal inflammation is often considered the primary driving disease.

Middle-Aged and Older Cats

As cats age, systemic diseases become increasingly common causes of vomiting. These include:

- Chronic kidney disease
- Hyperthyroidism

Older cats are generally less likely to swallow foreign objects, so intestinal obstructions become less common. However, pancreatitis remains an important cause of vomiting and may occur alone or as part of triaditis.

Chronic enteropathy continues to be a frequent diagnosis in older cats, and the risk of intestinal small-cell lymphoma increases with age. Other gastrointestinal cancers—including large-cell lymphoma, intestinal adenocarcinoma, and mast cell tumors—also become more common, along with cancers that originate outside the gastrointestinal tract.

Vomiting Is a Symptom—Not a Diagnosis

The most important thing to remember is that **vomiting is never normal in cats**. Even if it occurs only occasionally or seems to involve "just hairballs," it deserves attention.

Successful treatment depends on identifying the underlying cause. Depending on the diagnosis, treatment may include:

- Surgery to remove an intestinal obstruction
- Prescription diet trials for food allergies or food intolerance
- Feeding and environmental modifications for cats that eat too quickly
- Broad-spectrum deworming when parasites are suspected
- Treatment of underlying diseases such as kidney disease or hyperthyroidism
- Supportive medications including anti-nausea drugs, acid reducers, and medications that improve gastrointestinal motility

Working closely with your veterinarian to determine **why** your cat is vomiting is the best way to provide effective treatment and prevent more serious health problems from developing.

Remember: **Vomiting is a symptom—not a normal behavior**. The sooner the underlying cause is identified, the better the outcome is likely to be for your cat.