

Today's presentation is entitled "The Tail of the Vomiting Cat" and it comes to us courtesy of Marie from Palm Springs California. Marie takes care of Callie, an eight-year-old calico cat that she has known for all her eight years. For the last six months or so Callie has been vomiting on a somewhat regular basis, about two to three times per week. Sometimes she finds hairballs in the vomit, but other times there is food and/or liquid. Callie seems happy and healthy otherwise and Marie is wondering if she should be concerned. She has been told in the past that it is normal for cats to vomit on occasion. She has changed nothing in Callie's diet or her surroundings.

Right at the start, I want to clear up something I hear too often. It is not normal for cats to vomit. Vomiting causes loss of important fluids from the stomach that contains electrolytes, which are necessary for normal body function. Loss of these fluids can be detrimental. Having said this, I do realize that vomiting is common in cats and I think this commonality, if you will, leads to the notion that occasional vomiting is normal.

Vomiting is not by itself, a disease. It is a symptom. It is the result of irritation to the stomach and/or small intestine or less commonly a problem in the area of the brain dealing with balance. So the first assumption that needs to be made when Callie vomits is that there is an underlying cause.

Let's address the hair ball scenario first. It is entirely normal for a healthy feline to have hair in their digestive tract. It is there because of grooming using their tongue, carrying hair into their mouths, which is then swallowed. Normally this hair is passed down the digestive tract and out in the stool. When a cat vomits, there are often wads of hair in the vomit but it is not a cause and effect situation. The hair did not cause the vomiting. There are cases of excess grooming when too much hair gets into the stomach and can cause partial obstruction, which leads to vomiting. But even in these situations, it is not the hair that is the ultimate cause of the vomiting, it is the over-grooming. These cats usually have a flea problem leading to excessive grooming.

In Callie's case, vomiting is likely a symptom of an underlying disease. The list of diseases that can cause vomiting in cats, as one might imagine, is quite long. Anything that might upset the digestive tract can lead to vomiting. The fact that Callie had begun her regular vomiting six months ago tells us something is amiss.

When presented with a case like Callie's, I go about trying to determine an underlying problem. I would likely recommend radiographs of Callie's abdomen to help visualize what Callie's stomach and small intestine look like. I would also like to see the results of some blood testing to determine how things might be working inside. There are parasite problems that can cause vomiting in cats so it would be pertinent to check a stool sample. These initial diagnostic steps can be very revealing and at times provide a definitive diagnosis, however there are cases when these tests can be normal requiring further steps. This might include biopsy of the stomach wall or small intestine, as cats are known to commonly be affected by a disease called inflammatory bowel disease, which often times causes vomiting and is definitively diagnosed by biopsy.

Whatever the case, this vomiting problem of Callie's is indeed a symptom of an underlying disease process that needs to be diagnosed in order to allow a treatment, that in turn cures the disease and stops the vomiting.