

Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow

The increasing variety of hairball remedies makes it easier to find one your cat will like.

By Lori Luechtefeld

Hairballs, though far from being the most glamorous aspect of cat ownership, are a fact of life for many people and their pets. Notorious for the inordinate amount of time they spend grooming themselves with their tongues, cats can ingest an excessive amount of loose hair, which consequently winds up in the digestive system. The resulting hairballs can lead to vomiting and, in certain cases, more serious obstructions. Often, treatment may be necessary to enable cats to pass the hair that accumulates in their stomachs.

Although hairballs may date back to the origins of cats themselves, an increase in awareness among cat owners in recent years of the underlying causes and dangers associated with hairballs has heightened the demand for effective and convenient treatments.

Manufacturers have responded to this demand with a growing variety of products, allowing finicky cats a choice of flavors and textures.

Hair Gel

Traditionally, when people think of hairball treatments, they think of gels and pastes that serve as lubricants and allow cats to pass hairballs more easily.

Virbac Animal Health, based in Fort Worth, Texas, manufactures a hairball treatment that dates back to 1923. According to Katie Stevenson, product manager with Virbac Animal Health, the treatment still boasts its original formula and remains popular to this day.

Pet Living offers a hairball gel that is one of the company's top two most popular products, says Steven Peters, president of Pet Living Inc. in Bloomington, Minn. The company recommends the gel as a natural alternative to petroleum-based products.

Palatability is high on the list of demands of many cat owners, particularly those with the finickier cats.

"The key for me is the taste," says Kevin Schlanger, D.V.M., of the Brent-Air Veterinary Hospital in Los Angeles. "Many treatments may work wonderfully, but some cats might like it, some might not." Schlanger says his clinic uses a tuna-flavored hairball remedy that seems to be palatable for most of his cat patients.

Petkin's hairball remedy, focuses on convenience. "It looks like a stick of deodorant, and it allows the owner to apply some of the treatment to the kitty's nose without having to get the goop on their hands," says David Goldberg, president of Petkin Inc. in Marina del Rey, Calif. "It's an easy method of delivery."

In the Food

The quest for convenient hairball treatment delivery has given rise to the increasing variety of hairball-control food.

"If you put the treatment in the food, owners don't have to worry about how much to give their cat and how often," says Mia Karoutsos, owner of Downtown Pets in Chicago.

Specialty food contains added fiber and other nutrients formulated to ease out hairballs, and comes in a variety of flavors.

Virbac Animal Health offers a variation on hairball-control food that puts the remedy in treat form. The treats contain mineral oil as well as added fiber. Stevenson says the treats, which have been on the market for a couple of years, have been extremely popular.



"With gels, some cats love them and will lick it right off the owner's finger," she says. "Other cats are more finicky. The treats offer a much easier format for delivering a hairball treatment. It's very convenient, neater, easier, faster."