

My 19-Year-Old Cat Is Having Trouble Passing a Hairball

CatChannel veterinary expert Arnold Plotnick, DVM, says senior cats can have a variety of serious illnesses and that trouble passing hairballs is one of the symptoms.

By Arnold Plotnick, DVM

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Q: Our 19-year-old cat, Jo Jo, who is mostly a Maine Coon, has developed, we believe, a serious hairball problem over the last week. She has had hairballs ever since we got her at about 3 months of age. We're used to waiting these situations out until she expels them, but this time is different. Seven days ago, she vomited a few times as if she was trying to expel a hairball, but no hairball came out. She cried for hours that night and early into the next morning, something she's never done. Since then, she is not her normal self. She isn't able to eat very much (a real change from the norm), she doesn't purr as much as she normally does, and she often can't seem to get comfortable. She is drinking water, and she is urinating and passing stools normally. I've been giving her a dollop of Hartz Hairball Remedy on the tip of my finger each morning to try to help. Is this the best product to use? Should I give it to her more frequently?

We moved about a year ago and haven't taken her to see a vet since then. It is very traumatic for her, and we want to avoid taking her to a vet's office if at all possible. If we knew that they could do something to help her expel this thing while we stay there with her we would take her, but we don't want to put her through this trauma just to have them tell us that it will come out sooner or later and we'll just have to wait. Can you please advise us:

1. Will this (possibly large) hairball eventually pass one way or the other;
2. Is there anything else we can give her that would help her;
3. Is there anything that a vet can do in an office that can help her pass this hairball?

We love Jo Jo very much and want to do what's best for her.

A: I guess the big assumption we're all making is that this particular episode is due to a hairball. Certainly, your cat's history fits the bill. You've been cleaning up Jo Jo's hairballs for 19 years, so you know her pattern and habits pretty well. A 19-year-old cat, however, is definitely at increased risk for a variety of illnesses, many of which include vomiting and decreased appetite as a symptom. I think you should take her to your veterinarian, even though she finds these veterinary visits to be traumatic.

If your vet determines that this is not a serious concurrent illness, and that this is merely hairballs, then yes, I do think it will pass eventually. The brown gooey hairball remedy that you are currently using is fine. If this is a hairball that is lodged in her stomach, giving more hairball remedy is unlikely to help. In rare cases, when a hairball does seem to get lodged in the stomach, it is usually because there is something wrong with gastric motility. This can happen in cats as a result of other illnesses, such as inflammatory bowel disease or stomach cancer.

Again, I'd play it safe and have your cat evaluated by your veterinarian.