

The Cat Ate What?!

In our November issue of CAT FANCY, Dr. Plotnick talked about pica, a disorder where cats willingly eat non-edible materials. Here he shares his most bizarre pica case.

Dogs eat anything. Shoes, socks, keys, balls ... you name it and there's a crazy canine out there that's eaten it — and then had a veterinarian surgically remove it. Cats, on the other hand, show much more discretion about what they put in their mouths. In 18 years of veterinary practice, most of which have been feline-exclusive, I've removed a rubber band here, a plastic bag there, a piece of string or a ribbon now and again, but nothing really shocking. That is, until Hot Dog came along.

Jennifer Stallard stands out among my clients for a number of reasons, not the least of which is her crazy cat. My veterinary practice is located in Manhattan, where "da Noo Yawk" accent reigns supreme. When she brought her 16-pound orange bruiser of a cat into my office and introduced me to "Hot Dawg," it was clear that Ms. Stallard had come to the Big Apple from a place south of the Mason-Dixon line.

Hot Dog had come in for a routine physical examination. There were no health complaints. Hot Dog was eating, drinking, peeing, and pooping perfectly fine. His heart and lungs sounded good, lymph nodes were normal size, pulses nice and strong. Everything was normal, until I felt his abdomen. My heart sunk. I felt a mass. A huge mass.

I broke the news to Ms. Stallard. I told her that we should perform abdominal ultrasound to further characterize the mass, and depending on the diagnosis, we would assess our treatment options. A mass this size was highly likely to be cancer, I warned her, but we agreed to remain positive until the ultrasound was completed.

The following day, Patrick Hopper, a board-certified internist specializing in diagnostic imaging, arrived at our practice. Dr. Hopper quickly located the mass with his ultrasound probe. A puzzled look came over his face. "The ultrasound waves can't seem to penetrate the mass," he said, as he continued to manipulate the probe. Before I could ask him what the heck that means, he said, "This isn't an organ or tissue. This is a foreign body in the stomach."

I related the news to Ms. Stallard. I told her that this was a much better diagnosis than cancer. "So what do we do now?" she asked. "We take him to surgery tomorrow," I told her.

The next day, Hot Dog was prepped for surgery. I had my camera ready, as I suspected that this huge thing was going to be no ordinary foreign body. I made my abdominal incision and quickly located the stomach. I could feel the large mass inside.

I grabbed the scalpel and made my incision into the stomach. A big clump of brown material emerged. On first glance, it wasn't possible to determine what it was.

I pulled out the somewhat fetid mass. More material followed. And more. And more.

I dropped the shapeless lump on a towel, and my technicians Rita and Hiromi eagerly picked it apart in the sink while rinsing off the adhered food particles. "Oh my gosh!" Rita said. "Dr. Plotnick, you have to see this!" Hiromi echoed.

We laid out the contents on a blue surgical towel. The majority of the mass consisted of rubber-like bands used to keep Ms. Stallard's pony-tail off her neck. There were a lot of them: 28, to be exact. There were also a few huge rubber bands, a few small pieces of plastic ribbon, and several chewed-up clumps of paper.

Hot Dog recovered from his surgery, and Ms. Stallard came by the hospital that evening for a cage-side visit. I brought Ms. Stallard into the treatment room to show her Hot Dog's stomach contents. She looked at the towel, and in her genteel Georgian accent, said, "Hmm. Ah was kinda wonderin' where all of mah hair bands went to."

Hot Dog returned to our hospital several days later to have his stitches removed. His incision site looked great, and he was back to his old self. Ms. Stallard presented me with this lovely photo of Hot Dog. With a huge mouth like his, maybe it's not so surprising how much stuff we found in his stomach!