

Chronic Vomiting in Your Cat

By Lyra Read, DVM

Many of our cats like to leave us presents to clean up in the form of vomit. The most common excuse for this that we hear from owners is “my cat eats too fast and then brings up the food right after”. We also hear chronic vomiting being blamed on hairballs, but the reality is that there will almost always be hair in cat vomit due to grooming. A true hairball will be all or mostly fur, but if the contents contain more food than fur this would probably count as true vomiting.

Chronic vomiting can occur at varying levels of severity and frequency. We start to get more concerned about it if your cat vomits more than once a week on average, or if they are losing weight. Most commonly, chronic vomiting is due to an underlying inflammatory condition, which can include inflammation in the intestinal tract and/or in the pancreas. The inflammation in these organs is driven by an auto-immune disorder, somewhat similar to Chroné’s Disease or IBS in people. We call it Inflammatory Bowel Disease, or IBD.

Other causes of chronic vomiting include a less severe food “sensitivity” (less severe version of a food allergy), cancer (Lymphoma is most common), ingestion of something foreign, and non-digestive disease such as kidney or liver disease, thyroid disease, diabetes, and others.

How do we make a diagnosis?

First we need to rule out the “non-digestive” causes of chronic vomiting with routine lab work. This is done with blood and urine testing. We also try to rule out something like a foreign object your cat may have eaten with x-rays. Cats have been known to eat hoards of things like hair elastics that accumulate in their stomach, causing chronic vomiting.

For more severe cases we will recommend further testing. This could include an abdominal ultrasound to look at the structure of the intestines and pancreas, which helps direct further diagnostics or treatment. For example if there are areas of intestines that are thickened or irregular this would possibly warrant a biopsy (the only way to 100% diagnose IBD). We often also recommend a blood test called a GI Panel that is specific to intestinal and pancreatic function. This can tell us if your cat would benefit from vitamin supplementation, digestive enzyme supplementation, or if pancreatitis is part of the problem.

What is pancreatitis?

Pancreatitis describes inflammation of the pancreas. The pancreas is an organ responsible for secreting digestive enzymes, as well as production of insulin and other hormones. Pancreatitis in cats is usually auto-immune related, and less having to do with diet. As opposed to dogs where it is almost exclusively diet related. We may recommend a specific diet as part of the management for your cat's pancreatitis, but anti-nausea medication is usually needed and often a more effective treatment.

Pancreatitis and some degree of "IBD" are often both present in our chronic vomiting cats, so it is important to look for both to help us formulate the best treatment plan.

How do we treat these problems?

Depending on the severity of your cat's vomiting, and if baseline bloodwork is normal we may recommend a diet trial with a highly digestible food, or even a hypoallergenic food. This is often all that is needed for mild cases. We may also prescribe an anti nausea medication such as Cerenia, which can be dosed at just 1-2 times per *week* to control vomiting. This is often especially effective for cats with pancreatitis.

More serious cases might need steroids at a low dose to help control inflammation, or at higher doses for more severe inflammation. Remember, IBD is an auto-immune disease, so for more serious cases we need to suppress the immune system to control the disease, and higher doses of steroids achieve this quickly. Once we can control the symptoms on steroids we try to transition your cat to a different immunosuppressive medication that is safer for long-term use.

What about cancer (Lymphoma)?

It is always important to try to rule out cancer, especially if your cat is losing weight or the vomiting is more severe. Cats with Lymphoma can, and often do, have completely normal bloodwork. We need ultrasound and often biopsy to find it. On ultrasound we may see thickening or abnormal looking intestines, or enlarged lymph nodes. It is important to note that these changes can also be seen with severe IBD, so that's where biopsy comes in to help us distinguish between the two.

Fortunately, even cats with intestinal Lymphoma can respond well to a variety of treatments and have a good quality of life for months, to even years in some cases.