

## A Guide To Vomiting Cats

By Stephen Sheldon, DVM

“Dr. Sheldon, Room 3 is for you. It’s a sick cat.” I think to myself, well, the cat is probably either scratching or vomiting! In South Florida it seems the abundance of our caseload is dermatological and gastrointestinal. Skin problems abound due to our tropical environment; GI cases are so numerous for a variety of reasons. I’ll let you in on a few of them shortly.

Vomiting in the cat can be caused by a plethora of conditions. Here is a long list: Hepatic lipidosis, liver failure/disease/hepatitis, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), lymphoma, lymphosarcoma, pancreatitis, diabetes, poisons/chemicals/insecticides, hyperthyroidism, fungus, toxoplasmosis, panleukopenia, GI adenocarcinoma, food allergy, parasites/intestinal worms/flukes, kidney disease, hypertosinophilic syndrome, foreign bodies and good old hairballs. For every condition I just mentioned, I’m sure there are others also!

Vomiting in cats, regardless of the disease process, occurs due to one or two mechanisms: a humoral pathway or a neural pathway. Both involve an area of the brain called the chemoreceptor trigger zone. Borison and Wang developed these concepts in the 1950’s and NO, it is not known as the Boring Theory! Blood-borne substances activate the humoral pathway (i.e., toxins, poisons, kidney waste products, etc.) and gastric disease activates the neural pathway (i.e., gastritis, esophagitis, etc.). These theories are not without challenge, but until researchers find other mechanisms for vomiting, theory is aimed at these two pathways.

(Now that you know what is going on in my head, let’s get back to Room 3 and the vomiting cat.) History taking is very important and I’ll want to know such things as how long has the vomiting been going on; is there any relationship to eating; frequency; duration; what does it look like; what does your cat regularly eat; is he/she current on vaccination and parasite checks; increased thirst/urination; defecation; any diarrhea; any weight loss; have you given your cat Tylenol (Everyone repeat after me, “We never give our cats Tylenol!”); and lastly, does your kitty like strings? I hope you are beginning to see that I need your help in this matter.

Next, we’ll perform a thorough physical exam. Diagnostic tests, barium series and endoscopy are wonderful tools, but nothing can replace good ears, eyes, hands, and brains. Diagnostic tests will help us pinpoint the problem for a particular organ system, and for a GI case I usually want a Complete Blood Cell count (immune system), Blood Chemistry Panel (all organ systems plus electrolytes), Urinalysis (kidney, bladders, etc.), fecal exam (parasites), and survey Abdominal Radiographs (x-rays).

Hopefully, this will give us a diagnostic. However, if an intestinal obstruction, foreign body, or intestinal tumor is suspected, a GI series is indicated. This entails having the patient swallow a dye (barium or gastrografin) and watching it pass through the GI tract

by taking x-rays. If you think it's difficult to get a cat to swallow the stuff, you're right! Once we've established a diagnosis, we're on our way to treatment and hopefully a cure.

Do we always run the full battery of tests? No, and there are a number of reasons. First, the most common cause of vomiting in cats is dietary indiscretion—they eat things they shouldn't. Second, it can get expensive to run the full battery of tests. This is why your veterinarian's skill is important: it's up to us to advise you when we should be aggressive and when it's OK to be conservative. Conservative management involves rehydrating the patient with a fluid like lactate ringers and choosing an appropriate antiemetic for the perceived condition. A 12 to 24-hour fast is also a must. It's pretty basic: rehydrate, control nausea, fast the GI tract. Then, feed small amounts of an easily digested food (Hills A/D or just plain white rice flavored with chicken soup broth). For our clients who cannot get in to see us we recommend no food, one small dose (1/4 teaspoon) of Pepto Bismol, and start bland food in 12 hours.

Dehydration and electrolyte imbalances can be a result of vomiting. If they occur, they can be life threatening. If your veterinarian suspects this is occurring, he or she will want to get more aggressive in treating your kitty. Your kitty most likely will be hospitalized and an indwelling IV catheter will be inserted. This is used to rapidly rehydrate and deliver needed drugs/nutrients.

As we've seen, there are number of causes of vomiting in the cat. Diagnosing and treating these cases is a challenge for both owner and veterinarian alike. Always follow your veterinarian's advice in dealing with vomiting cats; they weight only 5 to 10% of what we do and can dehydrate extremely quickly.