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CHRONIC VOMITING AND YOUR CAT

When is it a problem and what to expect when we work it up?

Vomiting is when your cat brings up anything. That means hairballs, undigested food or any kind of fluid. Vomiting 1 - 2 times a month is considered normal. Plants are going to make many cats vomit too.

When is it a problem?

Vomiting with increasing frequency, like moving toward once or twice a week. Even if it's a hairball, it's too much.

When a cat vomits for a couple of days, then is OK for a few weeks and cycles like that month after month.

When a cat frequently vomits after "he eats too fast or too much".

What does it mean?

Vomiting is a vague sign and can mean a lot of things. Darn. We're talking about the chronic vomiter here. The one that feels OK but vomits a lot. Maybe the cause is environmental and easy to correct, like taking away the salad bar and by moving all the plants. Maybe an occult parasite is present and a simple deworming can take care of it. Maybe it's from a diseased thyroid gland or heartworms. And unfortunately, sometimes, maybe it's cancer.

But about 50% of the time, it's because of an immune response in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract that causes all sorts of stuff to happen in a smoldering, insidious way. Some cats just vomit, make stains on your carpet, and that's as far as it goes. Other cats get sicker from the messed up GI tract and don't absorb their nutrients very well and have compromised motility. Stuff just doesn't know which way to go and up it comes.

Some cats' problems don't just stop at their intestines. Many cats with this immune response problem called Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) have the same stuff happening in the liver and pancreas, and maybe other places too. IBD sets cats up for a lot of problems.

How are we going to find out what's going on?

There's just no way around the fact that we need to do a bunch of tests to try to define what's happening. We will ask to do a blood chemistry, complete blood count, thyroid function, leukemia/FIV test, heartworm test and urinalysis. We'll probably talk about treating for parasites too, to rule that out.

Sometimes we luck out and get an answer somewhere on all those tests. We need to do them because we need to identify the cats have a problem somewhere else that impacts on the GI tract without being a primary GI problem, like hyperthyroidism, heartworm disease or FIV. But many times all those tests look absolutely normal. That doesn't mean there isn't a problem, it just means that it's something that doesn't leave a footprint in the initial bunch of tests. We have reached a crossroads at that point. We'll discuss the pros and cons of another level of testing, empirically treatment, or, the best and most definitive way of getting an answer, direct biopsy of the intestine itself.

Now, that's the hard one. No one is thrilled to have to do surgery to get biopsies, especially when their cat is looking at them saying, "OK, so I threw up a little. Don't I look fine?" We can't tell you that you have the cat whose liver, pancreas or GI tract is smoldering with a process that WILL result in profound illness. The best we can do is say you might and that we see it happen regularly. We can also say that the better definition we have about what the problem is, the better we can treat it. But there you have it, getting biopsies of the GI tract, liver, pancreas, and whatever else looks weird is the best way to get answers.

OK, So I did all the stuff I was advised to do. How are you going to make a difference?

We're going to treat with medicine to decrease inflammation, address the fact that nutrients probably aren't getting absorbed, and change the diet. The weird diets we'll talk about can sometimes help slow down the immune response. Exactly what we do depends on the diagnosis from all those tests. We know this is a lot to take in. But it's a complicated problem with lots of angles. The better you understand it, the better choices you can make.