

Cat Vomit Clues: When to Call the Vet

That puddle on the floor might be more telling than you think. With an array of causes from the mundane to the grave, understanding your cat's vomiting is key to safeguarding their health.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- There are many underlying reasons that may trigger your cat to throw up, ranging from the mundane, like a hairball, to chronic diseases like feline asthma
- Irritable bowel syndrome, gastritis, parasites, foreign bodies, diet hypersensitivity, constipation and ulcerations can all contribute to vomiting in cats
- Feline hyperthyroidism can also cause frequent vomiting in cats, as can pancreatitis, kidney disease, liver disease, diabetes, neurologic diseases, cancer and feline infectious peritonitis
- The dry hacking cough of feline asthma is also often mistaken for vomiting, leaving some pet parents surprised by an asthma diagnosis
- It's important to get to the bottom of your cat's vomiting to address potentially serious underlying conditions

While a one-time vomiting incident in your cat can be normal, frequent vomiting sessions are not. Unfortunately, many pet parents write off their cats' persistent vomiting as nothing to be concerned about, when it actually calls for a trip to your veterinarian.

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Gastrointestinal Causes of Kitty Vomiting

If your cat gets into a toxic substance, such as **grapes** or a **poisonous houseplant**, vomiting can result. But assuming your kitty hasn't consumed anything unusual, digestive issues like **irritable bowel syndrome** (IBS) could be to blame.

The most common symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome in kitties are intermittent-but-consistent bouts of diarrhea, frequent trips to the litterbox to pass small amounts of poop and mucus, and constipation. But some cats also suffer from abdominal pain, bloating, nausea and vomiting.

If left untreated, IBS can progress into inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), which involves chronic inflammation of the bowels — another vomiting trigger. **Gastritis**, the medical term for inflammation of the gastrointestinal (GI) lining, may also cause your kitty to throw up. In worst-case scenarios IBD can progress to GI lymphoma.

Chronic gastritis is typically seen more often in cats than dogs and often involves vomiting once or twice a day, along with other symptoms as listed below. If chronic gastritis is left untreated, it can cause serious damage to the intestinal tract. Other symptoms seen with chronic gastritis include:

- Diarrhea
- Electrolyte imbalance
- Bleeding from the intestinal tract (look for black tarry stool or “coffee grounds” vomit)
- Lethargy, weakness
- Abdominal pain and cramping
- Retching, nausea, drooling
- Fever
- Decreased appetite and weight loss
- Dehydration
- Poor hair coat

Other gastrointestinal factors that may cause your cat to vomit include parasites, foreign bodies, diet hypersensitivity, constipation and ulcerations.¹

Why Else Might Your Cat Throw Up?

A number of other chronic disease may also cause vomiting, including pancreatitis, kidney disease, liver disease, **diabetes**, neurologic diseases, cancer and feline infectious peritonitis.² **Feline hyperthyroidism** can also cause frequent vomiting in cats, and it’s an epidemic in the U.S. More than a few cat owners have been shocked to learn their “vomiting” feline family member actually has a condition that inhibits her ability to breathe normally — **asthma**.

In this case, the dry hacking cough in feline asthma is often mistaken for vomiting or coughing up hairballs, with some pet parents caught by surprise by an asthma diagnosis. If you’re not sure whether your kitty is vomiting, coughing, regurgitating or something else, take a video when it happens and show it to your veterinarian for clarification.

What Does Your Cat’s Vomit Look Like?

While no one likes to linger over a mess on the floor, take note of the vomit’s appearance before you clean it up. The color, consistency and contents can give valuable clues about its underlying cause. Vomiting undigested food a few hours after meals, for instance, is a sign your cat may be **lacking in digestive enzymes**. If you see a hairball, then you know that’s the likely culprit. Other examples include:³

- **Yellow vomit** — This is bile, which supports the digestive process by breaking down dietary fats so they can be absorbed into the body. If your pet hasn’t eaten in 24 hours and has an empty stomach, bile may back up into the stomach, triggering vomiting.
- **White foam** — This can be a sign of inflamed small intestines or stomach lining.
- **Brown liquid** — Digested blood from the intestinal tract, due to ulcerations and foreign bodies, may look brown when it’s thrown up.

- **Green vomit** — Food from the small intestines may mix with bile, turning green.
- **Mucus** — If your cat “vomits” mucus it’s likely that he’s not vomiting at all but probably is regurgitating.

Pay Attention to Additional Symptoms

Vomiting on its own leaves much room for interpretation, but you and your veterinarian can narrow down a diagnosis by considering your cat’s other symptoms. If your cat isn’t eating, for instance, he may be nauseous or struggling with IBD or kidney or liver diseases. Seek medical care immediately. Sneezing along with vomiting suggests a virus may be involved, while constipation can also cause a vomit-inducing backup of contents from the small intestines and stomach.⁴

Throwing up along with consuming a lot of water may be a sign of kidney disease, diabetes or cancer, and diarrhea with vomiting signals inflammation in the small or large intestines. Ultimately, the only way to know for sure why your kitty is throwing up is to bring all of his symptoms to your veterinarian who can hopefully come up with an accurate diagnosis.⁵

In some cases, a gastrointestinal panel, abdominal ultrasound or even chest x-rays may be recommended to help figure out the cause behind your cat’s vomiting.⁶ While any vomiting shouldn’t be considered “normal,” it’s especially important to see your vet if your cat has vomited multiple times in a row, isn’t eating or drinking or has other symptoms or health conditions present.

Sources and References

^{1,2,3,4,5,6} [PetMD January 28, 2021](#)
