

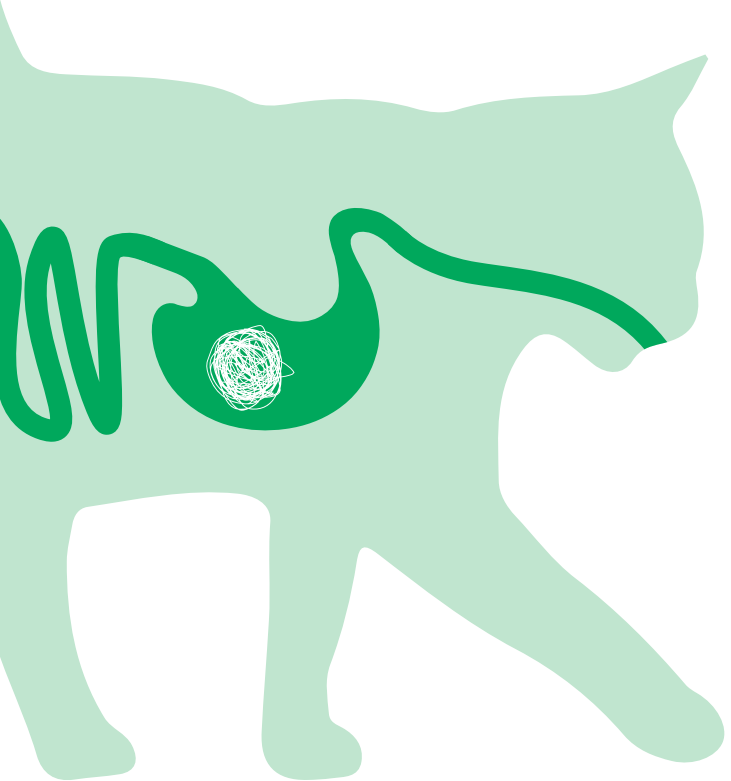
Digestive disorders – vomiting and diarrhoea



CATS PROTECTION
VETERINARY GUIDE 18



Most cats have a healthy digestive system, although mild occasional upsets are not uncommon. However, some cats can suffer from digestive disturbances on a more regular or long-term basis, which can be uncomfortable and debilitating for them and frustrating for their owners.



What is the digestive system?

The digestive system is effectively a long tube which runs from a cat's mouth to its bottom – its finely-tuned activity is assisted by other organs, such as the liver and pancreas. The digestive system has two main functions:

- processing food so that the nutrients can be absorbed into the bloodstream, providing the cat with the fuel it needs
- getting rid of waste products

The digestive tract is made up of the:

- mouth – where food is broken down into smaller parts by the teeth before being swallowed
- oesophagus or food pipe – which pushes food down into the stomach
- gastrointestinal tract, which comprises the:
 - stomach – where food is received and mixed with stomach acids
 - small intestine – where food is further broken down by enzymes and salts released from the liver and the pancreas. The resulting nutrients are then absorbed into the blood stream and taken straight to the liver to be 'cleaned up' before being circulated around the body. Some waste products from the body are returned to the small intestine after being delivered from the liver
 - large intestine – where water is reabsorbed and faeces are formed, before they are expelled from the body

What is – and what isn't – normal?

Top end

Eating habits

In the wild, cats eat small rodents so they feed little and often – similarly, many pet cats prefer to eat frequent small meals. Nervous cats may choose to eat more at night when it is quiet. Healthy cats tend to develop a routine with regards to eating and maintain a good stable bodyweight and have a good coat condition. For more information, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Feeding and obesity*. Seek veterinary advice if your cat goes off their food or change their eating habits.

Regurgitation

This is when food is eaten and is then ejected back out through the mouth. Regurgitation may be 'normal' in otherwise healthy cats which eat their food too quickly. However, it can also occur due to underlying health issues so it is best to seek veterinary advice if your cat regurgitates repeatedly.



Vomiting

Unlike regurgitation, vomiting or being sick is an active process which is usually associated with nausea and there may be drooling. The cat's abdomen forcibly and repeatedly contracts until the stomach contents are expelled via the mouth. It is not unusual for cats to be sick occasionally and this may be 'normal' if the cat is otherwise bright and is eating well without any weight loss, with no signs of diarrhoea. Cats often vomit up furballs, which occur after the cat consumes hair when grooming. These hairs become entwined together and irritate the stomach lining – they can be identified as clumps of hair in the vomit. Cats may also vomit food, yellow bile and/or frothy mucus.

Vomiting can also be a sign of underlying health issues and it can make your cat feel unwell, so always speak with your vet if you are concerned.



Bottom end

Faeces

Normal faeces are usually brown and well-formed and are passed easily without discomfort. Cats generally prefer to toilet once or twice daily in a private location that they can access with ease, away from busy walkways and other pets – and they prefer to bury their deposits. A change in toilet habits or location can point towards a health problem which should always be ruled out by a vet first – or it may be a behavioural issue – see *Essential Guide: Managing your cat's behaviour*.

An accident in the house or soiling around the rear end may be the first sign of a digestive upset in a cat that usually goes outdoors to toilet. In this case, use litter trays to monitor what is going on and hopefully avoid further accidents if the cat can't get out of the house in time. Some cats may strain, show discomfort or cry when passing faeces – and this may be seen with both diarrhoea and constipation.

Diarrhoea

When a cat is suffering from diarrhoea, its consistency may range from soft through to watery and the colour may be lighter or darker than usual. Disorders affecting the large intestine usually lead to small quantities of diarrhoea passed frequently – mucus and/or fresh blood may also be seen – whereas cats suffering with disorders affecting the small intestine usually pass large quantities of watery diarrhoea less frequently. A combination of signs may indicate that both the small and the large intestine are affected. Diarrhoea that is a dark port wine or black/tarry colour may indicate bleeding higher up the digestive tract in the stomach or small intestine. Diarrhoea may be particularly smelly.

Constipation

If your cat is constipated, hard faeces are passed or the cat may strain excessively while trying to toilet. Some cats with constipation pass small quantities of watery faeces due to inflammation of the intestine and this may be mistaken for diarrhoea. Dehydration is one of the causes of constipation.

Flatulence

This is an uncommon issue in cats – compared with dogs for example – but can occur with some disorders.

Digestive upsets may lead to a combination of signs including:

- a poor appetite with reduced or no intake of food
- a change in behaviour
- lack of energy or withdrawal
- weight loss
- regurgitation or vomiting
- constipation and/or diarrhoea



Terminology – what is gastroenteritis?

Inflammation of the various parts of the digestive system is termed ‘-itis’ but does not actually refer to the cause of the inflammation. For example:

- Oesophagitis – inflammation of the oesophagus
– or food pipe
- Gastritis – inflammation of the stomach
- Enteritis – inflammation of the small intestine
- Gastroenteritis – inflammation of the stomach and small intestine
- Colitis – inflammation of the colon
(part of the large intestine)
- Hepatitis – inflammation of the liver
- Cholangitis – inflammation of the bile ducts
- Cholangiohepatitis – inflammation of the bile ducts and liver
- Pancreatitis – inflammation of the pancreas
- Triaditis – inflammation of the liver, pancreas and small intestine

Common causes of digestive disturbances in cats

Diet

- overfeeding may cause diarrhoea and vomiting – especially in kittens or young cats
- a sudden change of diet, or feeding foods not designed for cats – eg rich human foods or excessive treats – can lead to digestive problems. Cats with outdoor access may suffer from an upset stomach if they eat human food waste, or consume wild birds and mammals – leading to vomiting, diarrhoea or constipation
- cats can develop intolerance to certain food types, even if they have previously coped with them. Lactose intolerance – a reaction to dairy products – commonly leads to diarrhoea so it is recommended that you do not give your cat milk to drink
- a poor quality diet which isn't easy to digest can lead to diarrhoea or constipation

Infectious diseases

- infectious diseases are another common cause of digestive issues, particularly in young cats
- viruses – diarrhoea can be caused by infection with a number of feline viruses, including feline parvovirus (FPV) and feline coronavirus (FCoV). Infection with feline infectious leukaemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) may also lead to digestive problems due to a disrupted immune system. See Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guides: Feline Parvovirus, Feline Coronavirus (FCoV) and Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP)* and *Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) and Feline Leukaemia Virus (FeLV)*
- bacteria – infection with bacteria such as *Campylobacter*, *E coli* and *Salmonella* may cause diarrhoea and vomiting. However, many healthy cats without digestive issues may also carry *Campylobacter* and *E coli* is one of the normal types of bacteria found in the gut of all mammals – only some strains may cause disease
- parasites – roundworms and other parasite infections can cause digestive disorders, weight loss and vomiting and diarrhoea

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)

Inflammation of the stomach, small intestine and/or large intestine leads to poor absorption of nutrients and causes abdominal pain, vomiting and weight loss – diarrhoea may also occur. The cause of such inflammation is currently unclear, but it may be triggered by bacteria found in the gut or certain food types the cat is sensitive to. Stress can also play a role in triggering IBD in cats.

Systemic disease

Other diseases can lead to digestive issues, including:

Liver disease

The liver has a number of important functions – producing protein and bile salts which help with the absorption of fat. It also deals with immune regulation, detoxification and glucose metabolism. Some disorders of the liver include:

- inflammation of the liver – due to infection, toxins or a disturbance of the immune system
- hepatic lipidosis – this occurs quickly if cats suddenly eat insufficient food – particularly if they are overweight
- cancers of the liver

Pancreas disorders

The pancreas produces enzymes to break food down so it can be absorbed from the small intestine, as well as producing insulin for the regulation of blood glucose levels.

- Pancreatitis can occur suddenly and can lead to chronic, ongoing diarrhoea
- Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency (EPI) is a rare condition in cats which leaves them unable to digest and absorb their food properly because they are unable to produce enough digestive enzymes

Triaditis

Inflammation of the pancreas, liver and small intestine can lead to discomfort, vomiting and/or diarrhoea – either intermittently or long term.

Disease in other organs

Kidney disease and hyperthyroidism are commonly seen in older cats and can cause digestive disturbance – see Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guides: Kidney or renal disease* and *Hyperthyroidism*.

Obstructions

The digestive tract can be obstructed by foreign bodies becoming stuck, narrowing of the tract after trauma and some types of cancer. Narrowing of the pelvic canal after a fractured pelvis can lead to constipation, as can disorders of the anal sacs – scent glands found just inside a cat's bottom – or a cat bite abscess near a cat's bottom.

Toxins

Some toxins inadvertently ingested may cause signs of digestive disturbance and often other signs too.

Cancer

Depending on the type and location of the tumour, cancers of the digestive tract may cause vomiting or diarrhoea, or a combination of both. Some types of cancer can be widespread in multiple places throughout the digestive tract. Cancers in other organs outside the digestive tract can also lead to the same issues.

Neurological disorders

- regurgitation can be caused by disorders of the nerves supplying the oesophagus
- Megacolon is a condition where the large intestine becomes enlarged and is less able to propel faeces along. It may also be caused by a disorder of its nerve supply

Inappropriate toileting site

Cats are quite fastidious when it comes to toileting sites and they know what they like! If they don't find their site appropriate, it may delay them going to the toilet which can lead to constipation. Things which commonly put cats off their toileting site include:

- finding it difficult to reach
- the cat litter being unfamiliar or uncomfortable
- being unable to bury their deposits effectively
- feeling threatened by anything they have to pass to get to the site including other animals, or noisy washing machines

Diagnosis

Treatment of symptoms may be appropriate if the cat is otherwise well and has not had the problem long, otherwise further tests may be needed. As there are many causes of digestive disorders, diagnosing the underlying cause can take some time and require a number of tests, particularly for ongoing cases. Your vet may consider some of the following:

- the history
- a physical examination
- faeces tests to look for evidence of infectious diseases – sometimes samples need to be collected over multiple days, as some infectious organisms are only shed intermittently in the faeces
- blood and urine tests to rule out underlying disease
- further tests as necessary – x-rays, ultrasound examination and/or endoscopy under general anaesthesia
- sometimes exploratory surgery and biopsies may be needed

- a long-term dietary trial – your vet may recommend a different diet to assess the response, followed by a change back to the original diet. They will compare the results and see whether the issue recurs

Treatment

Treatment of a digestive disorder will depend on the underlying cause, your cat's age and any health issues and the severity of the condition. Your vet will recommend the most appropriate treatment for your cat which may include one or more of the following:

- dietary management, which may include adjusting the type, volume, location and/or frequency of food offered. Managing the diet often plays a key role in solving digestive disorders, as long as your cat can't source food elsewhere
- prebiotics or probiotics to help balance the bacteria in the gut
- fluid therapy may be needed
- faecal regulators may be needed. These include binders eg kaolin, softeners eg lactulose, or lubricators – such as liquid paraffin based compounds
- enemas may be needed for cats severely affected with constipation
- anti-inflammatory treatment may be recommended
- antibiotics may sometimes be indicated for the control of some infectious diseases
- treatment for any underlying disease, such as treatment for hyperthyroidism
- surgery may be needed to remove a foreign body and for some types of cancer
- chemotherapy may be indicated for certain types of cancer

- stress management may help in the control of irritable bowel disease and for those cats affected by constipation because of difficulty accessing their toileting site as a result of stress. See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Understanding your cat's behaviour*
- to slow cats down which eat too quickly, use food enrichment activities – see *Essential Guide: Feeding and obesity*. Placing a very large cleanable and durable object – such as a very large stone – in the bowl can be helpful for some cats
- regular grooming and/or the use of special diets or oral treatments may be helpful for the management of excessive furballs. Skin disorders which cause your cat to moult a lot and/or ingest lots of hair when grooming may also require treatment

What does the future hold?

The prognosis will depend on the underlying cause. Many cats with digestive issues will return to normal following treatment or dietary management, whereas some conditions may require long-term or even lifelong management to prevent the potentially debilitating effects of long-term vomiting or diarrhoea. Sadly, some conditions may carry a guarded prognosis.

Learn more about your cat online!

Take a look at our free interactive tool to help you understand cats' origins and their behaviour within our homes. <http://learnonline.cats.org.uk/content/ufo>

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For more information about Cats Protection or to make a donation, please visit www.cats.org.uk or phone our Helpline on 03000 12 12 12.

Reg Charity 203644 (England and Wales) and SC037711 (Scotland)

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