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Ingestion of Foreign Bodies in Cats

Cats are curious by nature. They love to investigate new sights, smells and tastes. Unfortunately, this curiosity can lead them into trouble. This is probably how the saying "curiosity killed the cat" began. Cats are notorious for ingesting thread, wool, paper, rubber bands, plant materials and small toys. Many of these foreign objects pass through the intestinal tract without problem. It is common for cat owners to report all sorts of objects found in their cat's vomit or stool.

One of the more common and potentially life-threatening conditions seen in veterinary practice is foreign body obstruction. Although most foreign bodies do pass uneventfully through the intestinal tract, if an obstruction occurs for some reason, surgical removal of the blocked object is the only treatment. Another potentially life-threatening condition may occur if the cat swallows thread. As the cat swallows it, the thread may become wrapped around the base of the tongue, and will pull against the base of the tongue every time the cat swallows; if the thread was attached to a needle, the needle may pierce the stomach or intestines and prevent the thread from passing through the intestines.

How do I know if my cat has eaten a foreign body?

Most pets that have ingested a foreign body will exhibit some of these clinical signs:

- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal tenderness or pain
- Decreased appetite or anorexia
- Straining to defecate or producing small amounts of feces
- Lethargy
- Changes in behavior such as biting or growling when picked up or handled around the abdomen
- Pawing at the face or mouth if there is string or thread that has become wrapped around the base of the tongue

How is it diagnosed?

After obtaining a thorough medical history, your veterinarian will perform a careful physical examination. If a foreign body is suspected, abdominal radiographs (x-rays) will be performed. Several views or a series of specialized x-rays using contrast material (barium or other radiographic dye) will often be necessary. In addition, your veterinarian may recommend blood and urine tests to assess whether the patient's health has been compromised by the obstruction, or to rule-out other causes of vomiting such as pancreatitis, enteritis, infections or hormonal diseases such as Addison's disease.



How is an intestinal foreign body treated?

If a foreign body obstruction is diagnosed or suspected, exploratory surgery is generally recommended.

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Time is critical since an intestinal or stomach obstruction often compromises or "cuts off" the blood supply to these vital tissues. If the blood supply is interrupted for more than a few hours, these tissues may become *necrotic* or "die" and irreparable damage or shock may result.

In some instances, the foreign body may be able to pass on its own. In this event, your veterinarian may recommend hospitalization of your cat for close observation, and will perform follow-up radiographs to track the progress of the foreign object.

If any clinical signs are related to an underlying condition, or if diagnostic testing indicates compromised organ systems, these abnormalities will also require treatment.

What is the prognosis?

The prognosis is based on:

1. the location of the foreign body,
2. the duration of any obstruction,
3. the size, shape and characteristics of the foreign body, and
4. the health status of the pet before foreign body ingestion.

Your veterinarian will provide you with detailed diagnostic and treatment plans as well an accurate prognosis based on your pet's condition.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM

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