

Gastrointestinal Obstruction in Cats – Symptoms & Treatment

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At a glance:

About: A gastrointestinal blockage is a blockage occurs anywhere from the stomach to the intestines.

Causes: Ingested foreign object, hairballs, tumours, heavy worm infection, twisting of the intestine, telescoping of the intestine and adhesions.

Symptoms:

- Vomiting
- Diarrhea or a complete absence of defecation
- Painful abdomen
- Loss of appetite
- Hunched over appearance
- Lethargy

Treatment: Surgery to remove or repair the blockage.

About:

A gastrointestinal blockage refers to the blockage anywhere from the stomach (gastro) to the intestines. Thankfully gastrointestinal blockages are less common in cats than they are in dogs, however, they can and do occur.

Blockages can develop anywhere in the small or large intestine, it may be partial or complete. If a full blockage occurs, food, water, and gastric juices can build up behind the site of the obstruction and eventually cause a rupture.

Causes:

The most common cause of blockage is ingestion of a foreign body, other causes include:

- [Hairballs](#)
- Tumours
- Intussusception (a condition where the bowel telescopes in upon itself)
- [Hernia](#) occurs when part of the intestines protrude through the abdominal wall
- Volvulus (twisting of the intestine) which may run concurrently with a hernia
- Pyloric stenosis (a narrowing of the tract where material flows out of the stomach, most commonly seen in Siamese)
- Adhesions (fibrous bands of tissue which can form after abdominal surgery)
- [Heavy tapeworm infestation](#)

Young cats are most likely to have ingested a foreign body, common items include string, tinsel, clothing, rubber bands and plastic objects. Cats with pica (again, most commonly seen in Siamese) are at risk of developing a gastrointestinal obstruction. Tumours occur most frequently in older cats. Hairballs are an extremely common cause of a gastrointestinal blockage, they can develop in any cat, but long-haired cats are at greater risk.

Symptoms:

Once a full obstruction occurs, food and water cannot pass and is a medical emergency.

Common symptoms include:

- Vomiting, if the blockage is high up, vomiting will occur shortly after eating
- Diarrhea may occur if the blockage is partial
- Constipation or a complete absence of defecating
- Swollen, bloated abdomen
- Painful abdomen
- Dehydration
- Anorexia (loss of appetite)
- Lethargy
- Weight loss
- Hunched over position

If a complete obstruction has occurred, your cat will not pass any feces, but may vomit dark brown material with a fecal odour.

Left untreated a gastrointestinal blockage can lead to death and necrosis in the affected region, resulting in death.

Diagnosis:

Your veterinarian will perform a physical examination on your cat and obtain a medical history from you, including onset of symptoms. He may find evidence of a foreign body such as a string in the mouth, bunched up intestines, painful/swollen abdomen.

Diagnostic tests:

Imaging tests such as x-ray or ultrasound may reveal foreign bodies, hairballs or tumours.

Barium contrast study will be necessary to look for telescoping of the intestines, pyloric stenosis or intussusception. This involves feeding barium to your cat which coats the lining of the intestines, then performing an x-ray.

Endoscopy – A thin plastic tube with a light and camera at the end is inserted into the mouth and into the stomach to look for the presence of foreign objects, hairballs or tumours. In some cases, if a foreign body is found, it may be able to be removed at this time. Tissue samples may be taken during endoscopy.

Treatment:

Supportive care:

Your veterinarian may need to stabilise your cat before treatment commences. This will involve the administration of IV fluids to correct dehydration and electrolyte imbalances.

Treatment of the obstruction:

- Most cases of gastrointestinal obstruction require surgery. That includes tumours, hernias, twisted or telescoped intestines and pyloric stenosis.
- Endoscopy to stretch strictures. If scarring has occurred, surgical removal of the affected portion will be necessary.
- Surgical removal of dead intestinal tissue.
- Anti-worming medication to treat tapeworm.

Prevention:

It is not possible to prevent all conditions.

Do not allow your cat to play with string or thread and be careful with Christmas decorations which can be attractive to cats.

Groom cats at least once a week, and daily if you have a longhaired cat. It only takes a minute or two and most cats enjoy it.

Cats prone to hairballs can benefit from having fibre added to their diet or the addition of lubricants, such as butter, to help the hairballs pass through the body. [Read here](#) for more information on home remedies for hairballs.