If you have ever stepped on a wet, gushy blob as you stumbled to the bathroom in the middle of the night, please raise your hand. Right now, most of you are probably waving your hand in the air and nodding your head knowingly. Yes, that “blob” we’re talking about is a hairball, that cigar-shaped concoction of hair and mucus that cats bring up with a resounding “hack, hack, hack” on a regular basis.

Fortunately, there’s hope in the battle against hairballs. But first, let’s discuss just how a hairball is formed. Then we’ll talk about ways to reduce the number of hairball incidents.

**GROOMING TRIGGERS HAIRBALLS**

A trichobezoar (pronounced *trike-oh-bee-zohr*) or hairball as it’s commonly referred to, begins to form each time a cat grooms itself. Nicholas Dodman, BVMS, veterinarian and Director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University describes the hairball-forming process:

“When cats groom themselves, they are stripping dead hairs and slicking down their coat with saliva,” says Dr. Dodman, adding that cats possess backward facing “spines” on their tongues.

It is these spines, known as papillae that grab the loose hair. Acting much like an escalator, the spines shuttle hair down the throat and into the stomach. Once the hair reaches the stomach, it can either pass through it or begin to form a clump - just like when our hair becomes clogged in the drain of a sink or shower. As the clump grows larger, it begins to irritate the lining of a cat’s stomach. Before long, a cat will feel the urge to throw up and, voila, a disgusting mass of wet, tangled hair is unceremoniously plopped onto your floor or carpet.

But don’t blame your cat. Bringing up hairballs is actually a normal, healthy process. If your cat isn’t grooming and ridding itself of hairballs, it may be an indication that something is wrong. Left unchecked, an impacted hairball can lead to pain or worse — can cause a gastrointestinal obstruction.

In rare instances, the hairball situation can become life-threatening. Coughing without expelling a hairball can indicate feline asthma, and frequent or persistent vomiting should always precipitate a trip to your veterinarian.

**LONG HAIRIED CATS MORE PRONE**

Long-haired cats tend to produce more hairballs than short-haired cats. Some breeds, like the Persian, have been bred to have more hair than they would normally be able to handle on their own, so owners of these fluffy felines need to take extra care in their grooming needs.

Hill’s Pet Nutrition, Inc. takes hairballs seriously. Each year, the Topeka, Kansas-based company designates April 27 as National Hairball Awareness Day (no, really).

“Some 50 to 80 percent of cats produce hairballs as frequently as once a month,” says Debbie Davenport,
DVM, a Hill’s veterinarian, in a press release. “In most cases, hairballs are normal but unpleasant. In a few cases, hairballs can be a symptom of something more serious happening in the cat’s digestive system.”

According to a Hill’s Pet Experience Study, hairballs are the number one condition reported by 35 percent of households with cats. That’s a lot of hairballs!

We’ve already established that hairballs are a disgusting, albeit normal function of a cat’s digestive system. But if the sight of these mushy masses is a bit too much for you to bear, take heart. There are simple solutions to the problem.

Perhaps the easiest and most effective way to prevent hairballs is to brush or comb your cat on a regular basis. Brushing is sometimes easier said than done, as some cats find being brushed about as enjoyable as getting a bath.

But for most cats — especially cats who were introduced to grooming as kittens — being brushed is an enjoyable experience. The time spent together can also help you bond more closely with your cat.

Dr. Dodman suggests brushing a cat frequently to remove loose, dead hair.

“If you groom your cat once or twice a day, that will reduce the frequency of hairballs accumulating,” he says.

Most groomers and veterinarians suggest brushing a short-haired cat with a bristle or rubber-type brush or a fine-toothed flea comb. Use a wide-toothed comb or wire slicker brush for long-haired cats.

If your cat bristles at the mere sight of a brush, there are other measures you can try. They include commercial hairball remedies and foods manufactured specifically to combat hairballs. Hairball remedies come in a variety of forms, including flavor-enhanced gels and granules that can be sprinkled on food. Since gels contain mineral oil, which makes them slippery, they act as a lubricant that will help hairballs pass through a cat’s system more easily. Home remedies for hairballs such as petroleum jelly can also be effective.

SEEK HAIRBALL-CONTROL FOODS

As for food, there are many brands of hairball-control formulas on the market. These specially-formulated products contain natural fiber, which may help hairballs and other waste to move more easily through a cat’s digestive system, and may also nourish a cat’s skin and coat, thereby reducing unnecessary shedding.

If your cat does not have access to the outdoors, try providing her with “kitty grass,” a fiber-filled grass that is grown indoors in small containers. While no one is certain why cats enjoy eating grass, one theory maintains that it induces vomiting.

Whatever method you choose to undertake in the war against hairballs, it’s important to first seek the advice of your veterinarian.

So quit tossing and turning at night. The next time you hear that familiar hairball hacking sound at 2 a.m., grab your cat and a comb. In no time, she will be hairball-free and you will no longer find it necessary to tiptoe around those yucky deposits on your way to the bathroom.

IDENTIFYING HAIRBALLS

Watch for these common associated symptoms:

- A mass that looks like a caterpillar with matted hair. Many owners mistake the mass for feces — they can look very similar.
- Constipation or hard stools with hair showing
- Dry, matted coat
- Frequent dry coughing or hacking (especially after mealtime)
- Decreased appetite
- Lethargy or depression