



HealthyPet.com

SIGN-IN | Join our Community

Bookmark this site!

Site sponsored by:

FRONTLINE<sup>®</sup>  
Kills fleas and ticks fast...and fast. *Plus*

HOME | PRESS ROOM

Quick Site Search

ADVANCED SITE SEARCH

Dog Care

Cat Care

Exotic and Bird Care

Small Mammal Care

Veterinary Medicine

Pet Insurance

Life + Pet Blog

Pet Memorial

PetsMatter

AAHA-Accredited  
Veterinary Hospital  
Quick Search

Zip/Postal Code

within Miles



More hospital  
search options

Sign-up for our  
PetsMatter  
Newsletter

Email Address



Healthy Pet > Pet Care > Cat Care > Cat Care Article

## Why Is My Cat Coughing?



JEN REEDER

Claremont, Calif. resident Harrison Stephens and his family have owned plenty of cats over the years — he's 95 years old. Fortunately, by keeping the family cats vaccinated and regularly visiting the veterinarian, his cats never had any serious bouts of coughing that caused the family alarm. The main coughing their cats experienced preceded "coughing up" a hairball.

Stephens speaks from experience; however, for many cat owners, particularly new ones, a cat who is coughing can be disconcerting or distressing. Cat owners shouldn't dismiss coughing as a harmless hairball because it can actually be symptom of more serious health issues that, left unchecked, can lead to permanent lung damage.

"A cough and a hairball are not synonymous," says Janice Dye, DVM, MS, PhD, Diplomate, ACVIM (small animal internal medicine) and researcher at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Research Triangle Park, N.C.

While a hairball tends to be a symptom of a gastrointestinal issue (in combination with too much ingested hair), coughing in cats is actually a protective reflex for the respiratory system, much like our own.

"Respiratory disease in cats is fairly common, and coughing — with or without sneezing — is probably the most common sign associated with respiratory disease," Dye says. "If something gets into our airways — our windpipe is our largest airway — and it shouldn't be there, the cough reflex causes the patient to take a deep breath, and then rapidly force that air out of our airways, to dispel mucus or inhalation material."

A cough can be caused by very different things. The most obvious cause is when a cat inadvertently inhales food or liquid while eating (possibly after gobbling down food from the garbage or when an owner tries to force his or her cat to swallow medicine and it goes down the wrong pipe). People who sew should be particularly careful not to leave thread lying around. Cats like to chew on strings, and if there is a needle attached, it can poke through the esophagus and into the lungs, causing serious damage.



A coughing cat with sneezing, often with mucus, is likely experiencing a viral respiratory infection, and if its nose is so blocked that it is doing open-mouth breathing, the infection may be very severe.

"In general, open-mouth breathing fits with a severe bronchial constriction — you should never ignore a cat that can only open-mouth breathe," Dye advises.

Other possible causes of coughing in cats include so-called "feline asthma" as well as bronchitis, heartworm, lung infections, tumors and even a collar that is too tight (a general rule of thumb is that a regular-sized finger should fit between the cat's neck and collar).

When in doubt, head to the veterinarian.

"In this day and age of cell phones, we just tell people to videotape (the coughing or hairball retching episode) and bring it in when you bring in your kitty," Dye suggests. "A good exam by a veterinarian on a regular basis can help look for subtle disease before changes get so bad that your cat is frequently having bad bouts of coughing."

Other preventive measures include keeping cats' vaccinations current, not mingling them with unvaccinated cats (e.g., strays, at a boarding facility), and avoiding indoor irritants such as cigarette smoke, extremely dusty kitty litter and chemical cleaning products.

"If you're using any cleaning product that would give you a headache or make you sneeze or start to cough, by all means, take a break from that, but don't leave your pets in that environment either," Dye says.

Certain cats should be more closely monitored if they begin coughing, such as Siamese cats, who are "over-represented" with bronchial disease; older cats, who may have more serious issues like a tumor; and indoor/outdoor cats, who may have had a foreign body or bite that has traumatized the thorax.

When transporting a coughing cat to the veterinarian, it is important to keep them comfortable. If it is a hot day, "don't go from your nice cool home and put them in a really hot car," Dye advises. "Take the time to cool off your car, and then bring the kitty to it. Don't leave them in the parking lot while you run into the store to grab a few things on your way."

Ultimately, aside from the occasional cough, cat owners should take their coughing cats to the veterinarian to determine the root cause of the coughing so that it can be diagnosed and treated.

"Don't be paranoid, but don't completely ignore it, either," Dye says. "If we look, we can sometimes find something that we can treat such as a parasite or infection, and if we can get rid of it before it causes a lot of secondary changes in the lung, that cat can then go back to being completely normal."

Follow us on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube

Copyright © 2012 American Animal Hospital Association | Privacy Policy

AAHA. [Find out more.](#)

*Note: All content provided on HealthyPet.com, is meant for educational purposes only on health care and medical issues that may affect pets and should never be used to replace professional veterinary care from a licensed veterinarian. This site and its services do not constitute the practice of any veterinary medical health care advice, diagnosis or treatment.*

