


# **Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea**

[cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk)





**Digestive disorders are common in cats. They range from signs that are mild and resolve without treatment, through to debilitating disease. They can have many underlying causes.**



## **What is the digestive system?**

The digestive system is effectively a long tube which runs from your cat's mouth to their bottom. It 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. This provides your cat with the fuel they need
- getting rid of waste products

The digestive tract is made up of the:

- mouth, where food is taken in and broken down into smaller parts by the teeth, before being swallowed
- oesophagus, the tube through which food travels from the mouth to the stomach
- gastrointestinal tract, which comprises the:
  - stomach, where food is mixed with stomach acid to break it down
  - 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 bloodstream. They are then processed by the liver before being circulated around the body.

Some waste products from the body are returned to the small intestine from the liver

- large intestine, where water is reabsorbed and poo is formed, before being passed

## **Signs of digestive disorders**

Digestive disorders may lead to a combination of signs including:

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

# What is, and what isn't, normal?

## 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 for eating, maintain a good stable bodyweight and have a good coat condition. For more information see [cats.org.uk/feeding](https://cats.org.uk/feeding)

If your cat goes off their food or changes their eating habits then get advice from your vet.

## Regurgitation

This is when food is eaten and then ejected back out through the mouth. Occasional regurgitation may be normal in otherwise healthy cats who 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. It is usually associated with nausea, there may be drooling and the cat might vocalise beforehand. The cat's abdomen forcibly contracts until the stomach contents are expelled via the mouth. It is common for cats to be sick

occasionally. This may be normal if the cat is otherwise bright and eating well, and there is no weight loss or diarrhoea.

Cats can 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, liquid and/or frothy mucus.

More frequent vomiting can be a sign of a digestive disorder so speak to your vet if you are concerned. This can be the case even with furballs, or if a cat seems otherwise well.

See your vet when vomiting is associated with other signs such as:

- a change in appetite or behaviour
- weight loss
- diarrhoea

## Poo

Normal poo is usually brown and well-formed and is passed easily without discomfort. Cats generally prefer to toilet once daily in a private location that they can access with ease. It should be away from busy walkways and other pets. They prefer to bury their poo. A change in toilet habits or location can point towards a health problem. This should always be ruled out by a vet first before investigating if it is a behavioural issue. For more information see [cats.org.uk/managing-cat-behaviour](https://cats.org.uk/managing-cat-behaviour)

For a cat that usually goes outdoors to toilet, an accident in the house or soiling around their bottom may be the first sign of a digestive upset. 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 vocalise when passing poo and this may be seen with both diarrhoea and constipation. Cats may also start to toilet indoors if they feel it's a safer option. This may be because there are other cats present outside, or as cats become more elderly. The poo would still be of normal consistency and amounts, passed without discomfort or urgency.



## **Diarrhoea**

When a cat is suffering from diarrhoea, the poo consistency may range from soft through to watery. The colour may be lighter or darker than usual. Disorders can affect the:

- large intestine, usually leading to small quantities of diarrhoea passed frequently where mucus and/or fresh blood may also be seen
- small intestine, usually passing 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 or black 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 poo is passed or the cat may strain excessively while trying to toilet. Some cats with constipation pass small quantities of watery poo due to inflammation of the intestine. This may be mistaken for diarrhoea. Causes of constipation can be varied but include:

- dehydration
- pain
- a narrowing of the pelvic canal

## **Flatulence**

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

## **What is gastroenteritis?**

The different types of inflammation of the various parts of the digestive system have names ending with '-itis'. The names refer to the location of the inflammation but not the cause.

- Oesophagitis: inflammation of the oesophagus
- 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**

- A sudden change of diet or feeding foods not designed for cats, for example rich human foods or excessive treats. Cats with outdoor access may suffer from vomiting or diarrhoea if they eat human food waste, wild birds or mammals. When changing a cat's food this should be done gradually, over a week or two, to avoid digestive disturbance and encourage the cat to accept the new food. Kittens can be especially sensitive to dietary changes
- 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. Occasionally, cats can become intolerant to ingredients within their cat food, especially proteins such as chicken. If your vet suspects this may be an issue, they will recommend a diet trial. It is important to do this under the guidance of a vet, to avoid any nutritional deficiencies
- 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 viruses, including feline parvovirus (FPV) and feline coronavirus (FCoV). Infection with feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) may also lead to digestive problems due to a weakened immune system. More information can be found on our website:

Feline parvovirus (FPV):

[\*\*cats.org.uk/feline-parvovirus\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/feline-parvovirus)

Feline leukaemia virus (FeLV):

[\*\*cats.org.uk/feline-leukaemia-virus\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/feline-leukaemia-virus)

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV):

[\*\*cats.org.uk/fiv-in-cats\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/fiv-in-cats)

Feline infectious peritonitis (FIP):

[\*\*cats.org.uk/fcov\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/fcov)

Feline coronavirus (FCoV):

[\*\*cats.org.uk/fcov\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/fcov)

**Bacteria.** Infection with bacteria such as Campylobacter, E coli and Salmonella may cause diarrhoea and vomiting. However, healthy cats may also carry Campylobacter, and some strains of E coli are part of the normal gut bacteria.

**Parasites.** Worms can cause digestive disorders, especially in kittens. There are a range of other parasitic diseases which can also cause weight loss, vomiting and diarrhoea.

### **Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)**

Inflammation of the stomach, small intestine and/or large intestine leads to poor absorption of nutrients. This can cause vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain and weight loss. The cause of such inflammation is currently unclear, but it is thought to be an immune response that may be triggered by bacteria found in the gut, or certain food types. Stress may contribute to IBD in some cats.

### **Disease outside of the digestive system**

Other diseases can lead to digestive issues, including:

**Liver disease.** The liver has a number of important functions, including:

- processing food from the intestine. This produces bile which helps with the absorption of fat
- making enzymes and proteins
- storing iron and vitamins
- detoxifying the body
- involvement in the immune system, and glucose storage and release

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 too little 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. It also produces insulin for the regulation of blood glucose levels.

Inflammation of the pancreas is called pancreatitis. It can occur suddenly or be more chronic and with less obvious signs. The symptoms can vary and include:

- being depressed and unwell
- a reduced appetite or not eating at all
- vomiting
- looking uncomfortable
- ongoing diarrhoea
- more subtle signs such as occasional vomiting or diarrhoea or a changeable appetite

Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency (EPI) is a rare condition in cats. In this disease cats are unable to produce enough digestive enzymes. This leaves them unable to digest and absorb their food properly.

**Triaditis.** Due to the close relationship of the pancreas, liver and small intestine, inflammation can occur in all three organs at once. The result is similar signs of vomiting, diarrhoea, decreased appetite and weight loss.

**Disease in other organs.** Kidney disease and hyperthyroidism are commonly seen in older cats and can cause digestive disturbance.

For more information see

[\*\*cats.org.uk/elderly-cats-health-issues\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/elderly-cats-health-issues)

## **Obstructions**

The digestive tract can be obstructed or blocked by:

- foreign bodies (objects such as toys, bones or string) becoming stuck
- narrowing of the tract after trauma
- some types of cancer
- fractured pelvis

- disorders of the anal sacs, scent glands found just inside a cat's bottom
- a cat bite abscess near your cat's bottom

## **Toxins**

Some toxins if eaten may cause signs of digestive disturbance and often other signs too. There are many hazards around the home to be aware of. Find out more at [cats.org.uk/keeping-your-cat-safe](https://cats.org.uk/keeping-your-cat-safe)

## **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. Weight loss is often a feature. 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 signs.

## **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 poo along. This may be caused by a disorder of its nerve supply



## **Inappropriate toileting site**

Cats are fussy when it comes to toileting sites and often prefer to toilet in quiet locations, on deep litter, and in a clean tray. If the toileting site is not ideal, it may delay them going to the toilet. This can lead to toileting outside of the tray and could contribute 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 poo effectively
- feeling threatened by anything they have to pass to get to the site including other animals
- feeling exposed due to being in a busier part of the house, or close to noisy appliances such as washing machines
- the tray already being dirty
- the tray being used by other cats

## 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. It can require a number of tests, particularly for ongoing cases. Your vet may consider some of the following:

- a physical examination
- poo 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 poo
- blood and pee 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
- dietary trials. 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, 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
- poo regulators. These include binders, for example kaolin; softeners, for example lactulose; or lubricators, such as liquid paraffin-based compounds
- enemas may be needed for cats severely affected with constipation
- anti-inflammatory treatment
- antibiotics may sometimes be needed for the treatment 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 needed for certain types of cancer
- reducing stress and ensuring easy access to clean, comfortable and well-located litter trays is beneficial for all cats, especially those with digestive disorders
- to slow cats down who eat too quickly, consider using feeding puzzles or lick mats. 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 eat 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. 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 be more serious or life threatening, your vet will discuss this further with you.

## **Looking for cat advice?**

The following vet-approved guides  
are available to download from  
**[cats.org.uk/information-leaflets](https://cats.org.uk/information-leaflets)**

## Essential guides

**Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour** W84009

**Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour** W84010

**Bringing your cat home** W84002

**Caring for your cat** W84001

**Caring for your kitten** W84015

**Cats and people** W84014

**Cats living together** W84011

**Elderly cats** W84016

**End-of-life, grief and loss** W84007

**Feeding and obesity** W84004

**Feral cats** W84017

**Indoor and outdoor cats** W84012

**Keeping your cat safe** W84005

**Microchipping** W84008

**Moving home** W84003

**Neutering** W84006

**Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens** W84018

## Veterinary guides

**Arthritis** W83201

**Cat flu** W83216

**Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea** W83218

**Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV)** W83209

**Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD)** W83202

**Fleas and other parasites** W83215

**Heart murmurs and heart disease** W83211

**Hyperthyroidism** W83212

**Infectious disease and vaccination** W83217

**Kidney or renal disease** W83206

**Skin disorders** W83204

**Teeth and oral health** W83214

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**Please see [cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk) for more information on:**

**Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis**

**Cats and the law**

**Cats with disabilities**

**Diabetes**

**Feline asthma**

**Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)**

**Feline parvovirus (FPV)**

**Hypertension**

**You and your vet**

For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to **[cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk)**



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