

Mitzi and the giant hairball

October 2 2017, by Laura Diane Garrett



Mitzi has a problem that isn't easily solved. Credit: Julie McMahon

Mitzi is a longtime survivor of lymphoma. It's been five years since her last chemotherapy treatment, but she has been vomiting and her owners are afraid the cancer is back. Her stomach feels very weird – kind of doughy, like there is a big lump of bread in there. That's not how tumors feel; tumors are usually firm. The X-rays reveal a mass, but it looks like

strange material in her stomach. We decide to go in with an endoscope.

I love cats. I'm a cat person, but dogs are much easier patients. They pretty much wag their tail at you and hold out their leg for chemotherapy and lick you while you're doing it. Cats sometimes aren't so friendly about it, but I respect and admire cats for maintaining their [personal space](#).

Mitzi is a crossbreed, longhaired calico, and like most calicos, she is a bit weird. I can tell she has some Siamese or other oriental breed in her because she has nystagmus, a condition very common in Siamese cats that causes the eyes to flick back and forth unintentionally. Whenever we do a [physical exam](#) on her, she also chatters, flapping her jaw up and down very fast. Between the eyes and the chattering, my students always think Mitzi is having a seizure. But it's just her way of saying hello.

We anaesthetize Mitzi and thread the endoscope down her throat to her stomach. Then we see it: a huge hairball. It is bigger than the size of a fist, and it is stuck.

I wonder if this giant hairball was five or more years in the making. Cats don't lose all their fur with chemo, but they will lose their guard hairs, which are the thicker hairs on top. Being a long-haired cat, Mitzi probably swallowed quite a lot of hair over the course of her treatment.



“Like most calicos, Mitzi is a bit weird.” Credit: Laura Diane Garrett

I thread an instrument through the endoscope that has some grabbers on the end. Each time I latch onto the hairball and pull, however, my colleagues yell for me to stop. From the outside, it looks like Mitzi's whole abdomen is trying to come up her throat.

After a few tries, the grabbers get caught in the hairball. The only solution to this hairy situation: Mitzi must go into surgery.

We get the owners' permission and, since she's already anaesthetized,

wheel her right into the operating room. We open her up and take out the hairball, which would not come out any other way. It's the size of a grapefruit. I've never seen anything like it.

Editor's note: Mitzi lived another four years after this treatment and died from a disease unrelated to lymphoma or hairballs.



Mitzi's problem is solved. Credit: Julie McMahon

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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