

NOT BORING MEDIA

THE WOMAN WITH A 17-POUND HAIRBALL

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

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THE WOMAN WITH A 17-POUND HAIRBALL

In 2017, doctors in England removed a massive hairball from a teenager's stomach. It weighed 17 pounds and had been growing inside her for years. The condition that caused it has a name that sounds made up but is entirely real: Rapunzel Syndrome, named after the fairy-tale princess with impossibly long hair.

Rapunzel Syndrome occurs when someone compulsively eats their own hair—a psychological condition called trichophagia. Unlike food, hair cannot be digested by human stomach acids. It accumulates over time, tangling together into a dense mass called a trichobezoar, or hairball.

The teenager had been secretly eating her hair since childhood without her family knowing. Over many years, the hairball grew until it filled her entire stomach and extended into her small intestines—forming the characteristic 'tail' that gives Rapunzel Syndrome its distinctive name. She experienced severe stomach pain, frequent vomiting, and significant weight loss before doctors finally discovered the cause through medical imaging.

Surgery to remove the massive hairball was successful, but the physical removal was only part of the necessary treatment. Because trichophagia is a psychological compulsion often related to anxiety, stress, or other mental health conditions, the patient also needed ongoing mental health support to address the underlying causes and prevent the dangerous behavior from returning.

Rapunzel Syndrome is extremely rare—only about 90 cases have been reported in medical literature since it was first described in 1968. Most patients are young women and teenage girls, though doctors aren't entirely sure why this demographic is most affected. Some theories suggest it may relate to how different people cope with stress and emotional difficulties.

The condition can be fatal if left untreated. Large hairballs can cause dangerous intestinal blockages, tears in the stomach lining, or severe malnutrition. Early intervention—both medical and psychological—is absolutely crucial for patient survival and recovery.

Word Count: 295 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: New England Journal of Medicine

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 How much did the hairball weigh?

- A) 7 pounds
- B) 12 pounds
- C) 17 pounds
- D) 27 pounds

2 What is the medical term for compulsively eating hair?

- A) Trichophagia
- B) Rapunzel disease
- C) Hairball syndrome
- D) Trichotillomania

3 Why can't the human body digest hair?

- A) Hair is poisonous
- B) Hair is made of keratin, which human digestive enzymes cannot break down
- C) The stomach is too small
- D) Hair dissolves too quickly

4 Why does Rapunzel Syndrome require both medical and psychological treatment?

- A) Doctors can't do surgery alone
- B) Surgery removes the hairball but psychological support addresses the underlying compulsion
- C) Insurance requires both
- D) It's a legal requirement

5 What does this case reveal about the relationship between mental and physical health?

- A) They are completely separate
- B) Psychological distress can cause physical conditions in unexpected ways
- C) Physical health is more important
- D) Mental health treatment is unnecessary

6 Why might Rapunzel Syndrome often go undiagnosed for years?

- A) Doctors don't know about it
- B) Patients may hide the behavior due to shame, and symptoms develop gradually
- C) It's not a real condition
- D) X-rays can't detect hair

ANSWER KEY

The Woman With a 17-Pound Hairball

1. C) 17 pounds

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'It weighed 17 pounds.'

2. A) Trichophagia

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'a psychological condition called trichophagia.'

3. B) Hair is made of keratin, which human digestive enzymes cannot break down

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage states 'hair cannot be digested' and it 'accumulates in the stomach.' Hair is made of keratin protein that resists digestion.

4. B) Surgery removes the hairball but psychological support addresses the underlying compulsion

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage explains: 'the physical removal was only part of the treatment... the patient also needed mental health support to address the underlying causes.'

5. B) Psychological distress can cause physical conditions in unexpected ways

DOK 3 — Analysis. The passage concludes: 'psychological distress can manifest in the body in unexpected and dangerous ways.'

6. B) Patients may hide the behavior due to shame, and symptoms develop gradually

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking. The teenager ate hair 'without her family knowing.' Compulsive behaviors are often hidden due to shame, and symptoms like stomach pain develop slowly as the hairball grows.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Woman With a 17-Pound Hairball

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- NGSS — Connections to scientific practices

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why might psychological conditions sometimes manifest as physical behaviors?
- The condition went unnoticed for years. How might shame or embarrassment prevent people from seeking help?
- How should medical treatment address both physical and mental aspects of conditions like this?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research the digestive system and explain why it can process food but not hair.
- Create an informational pamphlet about seeking help for compulsive behaviors.
- Compare trichophagia to other body-focused repetitive behaviors and present findings to the class.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- New England Journal of Medicine / Scientific American