

FELINE DENTAL DISEASE

Animal Dental Specialists of Nevada

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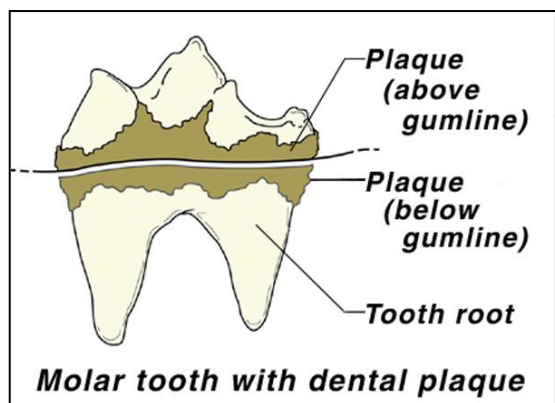
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How common is dental disease in cats?

Dental disease is one of the most common conditions seen by veterinarians. More than two-thirds of cats over three years of age have some degree of dental disease. The most common problems are periodontal disease and tooth resorption lesions, also called cervical neck lesions.

What are the clinical signs of dental problems?

Most cats with periodontal disease or tooth resorption lesions show no abnormal symptoms. Typically, their appetite is not affected. Some cats may be reluctant to eat hard food, or may preferentially chew on one side of their mouth. Cats with more advanced periodontal disease may develop bad breath. Dental problems may account for the “fussy appetites” that some cats display. However, dental problems typically do not cause a complete loss of appetite. Complete loss of appetite often is due to medical conditions unrelated to the mouth. More severe signs may be related to other conditions, such as Gingivostomatitis (see later).



What causes dental problems?

Tooth resorption lesions, periodontal disease, and gingivostomatitis are three relatively common types of dental disease in cats (see below regarding these conditions). More than one of these conditions can be present at the same time. The tendency to develop periodontal disease or tooth resorption lesions is likely a hereditary problem. Periodontal disease can also be related to many other factors.

What is periodontal disease?

Periodontal disease is the term used when inflammation and damage occur to the tissues around the tooth, including the gums, the bony socket (the alveolus), and the connective tissue that holds the tooth in place (the periodontal ligament). The most common cause of periodontal disease in cats is the response by the body's immune system to the accumulation of plaque and calculus (tartar). As in humans, cats accumulate bacteria and plaque on the surface of their teeth. If the plaque is not removed frequently, it becomes mineralized to form calculus. The bacterial products, decaying food, and chemicals produced by the body's inflammatory response are the cause of bad breath.

Calculus is easily identified by its tan or brown color. It normally starts at the gum edge, especially on the back teeth (the premolars and molars). In some pets, calculus may cover the entire tooth.

When the body's immune system responds to the accumulation of plaque, calculus, and bacteria on the tooth surfaces, it results in **gingivitis** (inflammation of the gums), which is the

earliest stage of periodontal disease. If the disease is caught at an early stage and a thorough professional anesthetized dental scaling and polishing is performed, followed by home dental care, the teeth and gums can be kept reasonably healthy. However, if gingivitis is allowed to persist untreated, then irreversible **periodontal disease** will occur. During this process the bone and ligaments that support the tooth are slowly destroyed by bacteria and enzymes from the body's immune response, leading to deep pockets in the gum tissue, loosening of the teeth, and eventual tooth loss. Once periodontal disease starts, the degenerative changes to the tooth and its supporting structures cannot be reversed. These changes also make it easier for more plaque and tartar to collect, resulting in progressive worsening of the periodontal disease.

How is periodontal disease treated?

The first step to treating periodontal disease is a professional dental cleaning procedure under general anesthesia. During this procedure, the calculus and plaque are removed both above and below the gum line. During the procedure, dental imaging (x-rays, and possibly cone-beam CT) is performed. More than half of the dental problems that develop in cats are only visible on dental imaging, and cannot be seen with the naked eye, even under anesthesia. If teeth have mild bone loss or pockets present, a deep cleaning, and possibly treatment with an antibiotic that is placed in the pocket, may be all that is needed. For teeth that have anything more than mild bone loss, extraction is often the best option, with a few exceptions. After a dental cleaning procedure, it is important to provide one or more forms of home dental care. Periodontal disease is not a curable disease. At best it can be maintained by regularly timed anesthetized dental cleaning procedures combined with home dental care.

What are tooth resorption lesions?

Tooth resorption lesions result from a progressive destruction of the enamel and dentin resulting in slowly deepening “holes” in affected teeth. They often begin below the gum line, affecting the roots first. At this stage, they can only be seen by dental imaging, as noted above. When the lesions reach the part of the tooth exposed to the oral cavity (the crown), they expose the sensitive part of the tooth deep to the surface. Once the sensitive parts of the tooth are exposed, these lesions are intensely painful, and the only effective treatment is to extract the tooth. The cause of this disease is unknown, and treatment other than removal of the tooth is ineffective. (For more information, see handout Feline Tooth Resorption Lesions).



Gingivostomatitis

There are several signs that should alert you to more severe dental disease or other mouth problems in your cat. Your cat may show a decreased interest in food or approach the food bowl and then show a reluctance to eat. It may chew with obvious caution or discomfort, drop food from the mouth, or may swallow with difficulty. Excess salivation may be seen, possibly with blood, and there may be a marked unpleasant odor to the breath. In some cases, the cat may be seen pawing at its mouth or shaking its head. A reluctance to eat may lead to weight loss. Many cats will refuse certain forms of food. Some cats will also stop grooming themselves, and develop a rough, unkempt, or matted coat. These symptoms may be associated with Gingivostomatitis. Gingivostomatitis is similar to periodontal disease, but is much more severe.

With gingivostomatitis, cats not only develop inflammation around the teeth, but also the cat's throat, cheeks, and possibly the lips and/or tongue. The exact cause of this condition is not fully understood but it is likely to be multi-factorial and may differ between individual patients. This condition is one of the more painful conditions that can develop in the oral cavity. Once gingivostomatitis develops, it becomes progressively worse with time. In some patients, it can be difficult to tell if the oral problems are related to periodontal disease, tooth resorption lesions, or gingivostomatitis. In fact, all three of these conditions can be present at the same time. If it is uncertain whether or not a cat has gingivostomatitis, initial treatment is similar to the other 2 disorders, with a professional dental cleaning and extraction of any diseased teeth. With tooth resorption or periodontal disease, this results in the oral inflammation and discomfort resolving. If the affected cat has gingivostomatitis, the oral cavity continues to have persistent inflammation and pain. Once gingivostomatitis has been diagnosed, the single most effective treatment is extraction of most, if not all, of the teeth in the oral cavity. Which teeth are extracted depends upon where in the oral cavity the cat has inflammation located. With gingivostomatitis, the "cheek teeth," which means all of the teeth behind the canine teeth (fangs), should always be removed. In cats with more widespread inflammation, the incisors (small teeth in the front) and sometimes the canine teeth must be removed as well. If a cat has had some of the teeth removed, and still has persistent inflammation, then the remaining teeth must be removed in a subsequent dental procedure. Statistically, there is a 60%-80% chance that removal of the teeth will result in long-term comfort for affected cats. Cats with this condition that have had all of their teeth extracted typically do extremely well, and often thrive from the significantly increased comfort that they gain from having the teeth removed. In addition, cats that do not have any teeth are able to eat very well. In fact, some cats with no teeth still prefer hard food over canned food. Many cats tend to swallow hard food whole, even when all of their teeth are still present. For cats, teeth are a luxury...not a necessity. There is a smaller percentage of cats that do not get enough comfort, even after removal of all of the teeth. This condition is called "refractory gingivostomatitis." This condition is often very difficult to control and may require repeated or constant treatment. There are various medications and treatments that may improve the comfort of cats with refractory gingivostomatitis. There is an even smaller number of cats that do not respond to any treatment for gingivostomatitis.

What should I do if my cat has signs of dental problems?

If you see that your cat has evidence of calculus accumulation, gingivitis or is exhibiting any signs of mouth pain or discomfort, you should take it to your veterinarian for an examination. You will be advised of the most appropriate course of treatment, which may involve having the cat's teeth examined and cleaned under general anesthesia. Dental imaging, at least in the form of dental x-rays, is always needed to identify the extent of the dental disease.

The rate of calculus accumulation is extremely variable between individual cats, and in some cats, this may necessitate professional dental cleaning on a regular basis (every 6-12 months). In other cats, treatment is only needed every few years. Only your veterinarian can determine the best schedule for your pet, based on examination.

Do not try to remove calculus from your pet's teeth yourself using any form of metallic instrument. Aside from potentially harming your cat's gum tissue or the cat harming you, you are likely to damage the tooth surface by creating microscopic scratches, which will provide areas for bacteria to cling to and encourage more rapid plaque formation, thus making the problem worse. In addition, do not let a groomer or other animal care professional convince you that an adequate dental cleaning can be performed without general anesthesia. Dental cleaning procedures without general anesthesia are ineffective, can be harmful, and give a false sense of

security that the oral disease is being addressed. Non-anesthetic dental procedures are not wise under any circumstances.

What can I do to help prevent dental problems in my cat?

The best way to help prevent periodontal disease is to keep the mouth as hygienic as possible and to reduce the rate at which plaque and calculus build up on the teeth. Dental home care for cats is very beneficial for this and helps to reduce the severity of periodontal disease. Unfortunately, home dental care does not prevent tooth resorption lesions and is often ineffective at controlling or preventing gingivostomatitis.

Recent advances in nutrition have resulted in diets that help to reduce tartar accumulation. There are several diets that are specifically labeled for “oral care.” One specific diet in helping to keep the teeth clean is a prescription diet available from your veterinarian, called “Hills Prescription Diet t/d.”

The most effective way of reducing plaque and calculus accumulation is to brush the teeth. There are toothpaste and brushes available from your veterinarian that are specially designed for a cat’s mouth. With gentleness, patience and perseverance it *is* possible to regularly clean some cats’ teeth in this way. The best time to get your cat used to tooth brushing is when he/she is a kitten. You can start by gently touching and massaging the gums with your finger, when he/she is in a calm, quiet mood. After your kitten accepts this, you can switch over to using the toothbrush with no paste, and eventually introduce the toothpaste. In addition, or as an alternative if the cat will not accept brushing, a range of chews (Greenies, CET, and others), antibacterial rinses and gels can be applied to the teeth and mouth to reduce the number of bacteria present and improve oral health. Other products that can be of some benefit include drinking water additives and food additives (Plaque Off or Imuquin). Please ask your veterinarian for further details regarding available dental products for your cat. A listing of effective dental home care products can be found on the web site for the Veterinary Oral Health Council (see below).

Never use human toothpaste on cats, as these products are not designed to be swallowed and could cause problems.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Ernest Ward, DVM.
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Note: Information contained in here has been modified/updated as of 1-24-24 by Brian Hewitt, DVM, DAVDC.*

Additional information and handouts can be found online at the web sites of:
The American Veterinary Dental College - <https://avdc.org/animal-owner-resources/>
Veterinary Partner web site - <http://www.veterinarypartner.com>
Veterinary Oral Health Council - <http://www.vohc.org>