

MOUTH DISORDERS OF THE CAT

A cat's mouth is the most frequently overlooked part of a cat's body, primarily because most cats dislike anyone opening their mouth or lips. There are several serious disorders that occur frequently in a cat's mouth. Most of them can be prevented, or slowed, if diagnosed and treated early through routine preventive care.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON DISORDERS OF THE MOUTH? The most frequent disorders of the feline mouth are periodontal disease caused by plaque and tartar, cervical neck lesions of the tooth, and fractured teeth.

WHAT IS PERIODONTAL DISEASE IN CATS? Periodontal disease is an infection and inflammation of the gum tissue caused by a buildup of tartar or plaque on the tooth and under the gum margin. Plaque is produced by the collection of food and bacteria. Tartar is produced by bacteria dying and forming a mineralized layer consisting of dead bacteria and food debris.

If the buildup of tartar is allowed to continue, it causes infection which spreads, causing the gums to erode. This is accompanied by the breaking down of the periodontal ligament that holds the tooth in place and dissolving the bone that supports the tooth. This causes pain for the cat and leads to an unwillingness to eat as well as the eventual loss of the involved teeth. The infection of the gums and bone can also spread to other organs, leading to kidney and heart disease. You can fight periodontal disease by scheduling routine dental prophylaxis (dental cleaning) for your cat.

WHAT IS A CERVICAL NECK LESION? A lesion unique to the cat is the cervical neck lesion. The cat with this disease begins to actively reabsorb one or more of its teeth. The initial lesion is hidden just below the gum line and, if found early, looks just like a cavity. The difference is that the cavities are caused by bacterial infection, and the neck

lesion is caused by the cat's body activating cells that dissolve away the root and inner structure of the tooth. These lesions are very painful, especially to any touch, and invariably lead to the destruction and loss of the affected teeth. At this time, there is no known way of preventing these lesions, and extracting the affected teeth is best for the cat. Many cats with these lesions will refuse to chew food on the affected side, complicating the medical issue with development of periodontal disease, in addition to the cervical neck lesion.

OF WHAT SIGNIFICANCE ARE FRACTURED TEETH? Another overlooked problem in cats is fractured teeth. The upper canine teeth of the cat angle upward from the upper jaw and, during fights, can be fractured when bumped against a hard object. If the fracture does not expose the tooth pulp, the tooth is generally safe. If the pulp is exposed, a tooth root abscess will eventually occur, often causing a permanent opening into the nasal sinuses. Weakened teeth from large cervical neck lesions may also fracture, making extraction of the remaining tooth fragments necessary.

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR IN MY CAT'S MOUTH? The most evident signs of dental problems are, swollen, red or bleeding gums, accumulated tartar and difficulty or refusal to eat. If your cat has any of these symptoms, he or she should be checked at once by your veterinarian.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I SCHEDULE ROUTINE DENTAL PROPHYLAXIS FOR MY CAT? This depends on your cat's age and medical history. When you bring your cat in for his or her yearly physical examination, your veterinarian will advise you if a further dental examination and teeth cleaning is required. For some cats, this can be as frequently as twice a year or as infrequently as once every two years.