



VETERINARY HOSPITAL & HOTEL

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Dental Disease in Cats

Dental disease is a common and often overlooked problem in cats. Tartar accumulation leads to irritation of the gums around the base of the teeth, ultimately leading to exposure of the roots. Potential outcomes of this tooth root exposure include gum infections, tooth loss, and infections in the heart and kidneys.

Contributing Factors

One of the main factors determining the amount of tartar buildup is the *individual chemistry* in the mouth. Some cats need yearly cleanings; other cats need a cleaning only once every few years.

Diet plays more of a minor role in development of tartar accumulation than most people think. Because dry food is not as sticky as canned food, it does not adhere to the teeth as much and thus, does not cause tartar buildup as rapidly. However, eating dry food does not remove tartar from the teeth. Once tartar forms, a professional cleaning is necessary.

Other known contributing factors for feline dental disease are the *feline leukemia virus* and *feline immunodeficiency virus*. Severe disease of the teeth and gums can alert the veterinarian to test for these diseases.

Clinical Signs

In some cases, owners are unaware that their cat has dental disease. The problem may be identified with a routine physical examination or during investigation of another problem. In other situations, the probability of dental disease is apparent to the owner. The cat may have very bad breath (halitosis), difficulty eating, or changes in temperament.

Causes

Many different disorders can lead to dental disease in the cat. In general, the veterinarian will try to determine whether the problem is limited to the oral cavity (primary dental disease) or has developed as a consequence of another disease (secondary dental disease).

Diagnosis

Diagnosis of dental disease is usually very straightforward. In most cases, the true extent of the disease cannot be determined unless the cat is under anesthesia. This facilitates a more complete examination of the oral cavity.

The Cleaning Process

Proper cleaning of the teeth requires complete cooperation of the patient so that plaque and tartar can be removed properly. Anesthesia is required to *thoroughly* clean the teeth. Many owners have a high degree of anxiety related to general anesthesia for their cats. While there is always a degree of risk with any anesthetic, be aware that your cat's health may ultimately be compromised by delaying proper dental care.

To minimize risk, our hospital uses modern anesthetics that are deemed safe even for older cats. Also, depending on your cat's age and general health status, blood may be drawn prior to anesthesia to evaluate blood cell counts and blood chemistry.

There are five steps in the cleaning process that will be used on your cat:

Scaling removes the tartar above and below the gum line. This is done with hand instruments and ultrasonic cleaning equipment. The tartar, which is under the gums, must be removed for a dental cleaning to be complete. *Polishing* smooths the surface of the teeth, making them resistant to additional plaque formation.

Flushing removes dislodged tartar from the teeth and helps to remove the bacteria that accompany tartar.

Fluoride coating decreases teeth sensitivity, strengthens enamel, and decreases the rate of future plaque formation.

Sealant applied at the end of the procedure provides protection from further plaque accumulation for about 2 weeks. We also offer a take home kit that you can use to apply sealant at home.

Prognosis

In the early stages of dental disease, the problems may be reversible. At some point, however, even cleaning cannot restore the mouth to normal. This is not a reason to avoid cleaning!

The prognosis is worsened if tartar is left on the teeth indefinitely. Some of the consequences of delayed dental care are:

- 1) Tartar will mechanically push the gums away from the roots of the teeth. This allows the teeth to loosen in their sockets and infection to enter the root socket. The teeth will loosen and fall out or have to be extracted.
- 2) Infection will accumulate in the mouth, resulting in gingivitis (gums), tonsillitis, and pharyngitis (sore throat). Although antibiotics may temporarily suppress the infection, if the tartar is not removed from the teeth, infection will return quickly.
- 3) Infection within the mouth will be picked up by the blood stream and carried to other parts of the body. Kidney and heart infections frequently begin in the mouth and can be life threatening.

Prevention

Several preventive measures can be recommended to aid in oral hygiene for your cat.

1. Seek regular veterinary care and have the teeth cleaned when advised.
2. Try to maintain home dental care by one or more of the following options; brushing teeth, dental diets, oral tartar control products, anti-bacterial products. Ask us about the options and we would be happy to go over them with you.