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DENTAL DISEASE

How common is dental disease in cats?

Dental disease is one of the most frequent ailments seen by veterinary surgeons, and can be found to some degree in the majority of cats over two years of age fed commercial fat food exclusively. The most common problems are due to periodontal disease, gingivitis and neck lesions (also called resorptive lesions or odontoclastic lesions).

What signs am I likely to see?

There are a number of signs which should alert you to the possibility of dental disease or other mouth problems being present. Your cat may show less interest in food, or approach the food bowl then be reluctant to eat, or back away. It may chew with obvious caution and discomfort, drop food from the mouth, or may swallow with difficulty. Dribbling may be seen, possibly with blood, and there may be a marked unpleasant odour to the breath. In some cases the cat may be seen pawing at their mouth or head shaking. A reluctance to eat may lead to weight loss.

What usually causes dental disease?

The most common cause of dental disease in cats is due to tartar accumulation. As in humans, cats accumulate bacterial plaque on the surface of their teeth, which if not removed quickly becomes mineralised to form tartar (also called calculus). The bacterial products and decaying food stuck to tartar are one potential cause of bad breath.

Tartar is easily identified by its light or dark brown colour - it is normally first seen at the gum edge, especially on the back teeth (premolars & molars). In severe cases it may entirely cover the teeth.

The accumulation of tartar and bacteria on the teeth surfaces will, sooner or later, lead to infection and **gingivitis** (inflammation of the gums). If the disease is caught at this early stage then thorough professional veterinary treatment may permit a full recovery. 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 destroyed leading to excessive tooth mobility and eventually tooth loss. Infection

around the socket causes the formation of pus and a foul odour, and may spread deep into the tooth socket creating an abscess, or even more severe problems.

Once periodontal disease starts, the degenerative changes cannot be reversed. These changes make it easier for more plaque and tartar to collect, so resulting in further disease.

Is gingivitis always associated with dental disease?

A slight degree of redness seen as a thin line just below the edge of the gum may be considered normal in some kittens and adult cats with little evidence of dental disease.

Some cats (most commonly, but not exclusively, in pedigree breeds) develop severe gingivitis with minimal signs of accompanying dental disease. The affected areas may extend beyond the gums to other areas of the mouth, such as the throat or tongue. The cause of this disease is thought to be prior infection with feline Calici virus. This condition is often very difficult to control and may require repeated or constant treatment.

What are tooth neck lesions?

Neck lesions result from a progressive destruction of the tooth substance effectively resulting in slowly deepening “holes” in the teeth concerned. Once the sensitive parts of the tooth is exposed these lesions are intensely painful, and usually the only available treatment is to extract the tooth. The cause of this disease is unknown, however poor oral hygiene is suspected to play a role in the disease-process.

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

If you can see that your cat has evidence of tartar accumulation, gingivitis or is exhibiting any signs of mouth pain or discomfort then you should take it to your vet for a check-up. You will be advised of the most appropriate course of treatment, which may involve having the cat’s teeth examined and cleaned under general anaesthesia.

The rate of tartar accumulation is very variable between individual cats, and in some cases this may necessitate professional cleaning on a regular basis (every 6-12 months)

Do not try to remove tartar from the teeth yourself using any form of metallic instrument. Aside from potentially harming your cat’s mouth (or the cat harming you!), you are likely to damage the tooth surface by creating microscopic scratches, which will encourage more rapid plaque formation and cause further disease.

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

In order to help prevent dental disease the prime aim is to keep the mouth as hygienic as possible and to reduce the rate at which tartar builds up on the teeth.

The diet should contain, in part, foodstuffs which encourage chewing, such as tough pieces of meat and raw meaty bones. Examples include chicken wings, chicken necks, lamb shanks and so forth. These should be included in the diet on a regular basis, i.e. several times per week. The act of chewing stimulates the production of saliva, which contains natural antibacterial substances; and the mechanical action helps to scrape plaque and tartar off from the teeth.

It is best to introduce cats to this type of food from an early age. In addition, decreased disease due to Calici virus should be obtained by using a polyvalent Calici virus vaccine, e.g. Feline 3 in 1 vaccines.