



Dental health care in cats – prevention and treatment

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Adult cats have a total of 30 permanent teeth. It is really important to make sure your cat's teeth and gums stay healthy and comfortable as this helps to maintain a good quality of life for your feline friend.

So what can pet owners do to ensure their cat's teeth stay healthy?

Diet

The diet alone can play a large role in prevention of gum disease. Cats fed purely wet food (such as tinned cat food) will quickly develop periodontal (gum) disease, often leading to infection and tooth loss.

This is because there is very little chewing involved, particularly when cats are fed mostly tinned food. Chewing promotes saliva production which has anti-bacterial properties, so foods that promote more chewing are beneficial for teeth.

It is a good idea to introduce dry biscuits to kittens so that they become accustomed to eating it early on. I usually recommend approximately 70:30 dry:wet food ratio initially and 50:50 dry:wet food ratio for senior cats (from seven years old).

Foods designed specifically to help our pet's teeth stay healthy are a great option.

Hills Science Diet Oral Care biscuits are an excellent choice for adult cats as they are designed to help encourage more chewing. These are available from Cat Protection, vets and pet stores.

Hills Science Diet has recently released a Vet Essentials dry food range for kittens and adult cats which consists of a much larger and harder biscuit than usual, encouraging a lot more chewing while eating.

Rather than feeding just tinned food, raw beef cut into 5cm strips (three to four pieces at a time) and chicken wing tips (the soft part) can be a great supplement to the diet as these also encourage more chewing. If your cat isn't interested in them, put them in the microwave for five to 10 seconds and you might be successful.

Greenies are also a favourite dental chew for many cats – you can purchase these at your local vet, Cat Protection or pet shop.

Annual vet check

All adult cats should be examined by a vet at least annually and not just when they get a problem. Included in the visit is an oral examination to check the teeth are healthy. Your vet will be able to discuss any dental problems at the time and explain what needs to be done.

Sometimes a diet change is advised if the problem is mild while in other cases, a dental scale and polish is recommended (see below).

Many pet owners think that their cat's mouth must be okay because he or she is still eating. It is rare for cats to stop eating despite severe dental disease and pain. They need to eat to survive and so will usually eat despite the pain, or use the other side of the mouth to chew if only one side is affected. Cats tend to instinctively hide their problems and as a result they can have severe dental disease that is barely noticeable to the owner.

For cats with a small amount of tartar on their teeth or mild gingivitis, feeding the prescription diet Hills T/D (which stands for Teeth Diet) can actually eliminate these problems altogether. This diet is available from your vet.

Dental scale and polish

Proper cleaning of the teeth requires general anaesthesia in pets so that plaque and tartar can be removed properly. The majority of vet hospitals have dentistry equipment so that routine dental work can be carried out on-site.

Once your cat is under the anaesthetic, an oral examination and assessment is performed to differentiate healthy from diseased teeth and then the teeth scaled and polished.

Scaling removes the plaque and tartar both above and below the gum line. This is done with sophisticated ultrasonic cleaning equipment and dental instruments.

Polishing smooths the surface of the teeth, making them more resistant to subsequent plaque accumulation.

Flushing removes dislodged tartar from the teeth and helps to remove the bacteria from the oral cavity.

Extractions

Extractions remove the teeth that are not salvageable. As much of the dental disease is going on below the gums, it is usually not possible to know whether extractions will be needed until your pet's mouth is examined with a dental probe while he or she is anaesthetised. So it is important to remain contactable via telephone on the day of the procedure. Your vet will then be able to discuss any necessary extractions and the costs involved.

The extraction sites are sutured using a fine dissolvable suture material and pain relief is given. If

multiple extractions are required, your pet may need to stay in hospital overnight on intravenous fluid therapy and be given further pain relief to keep him or her comfortable.

Severe periodontal disease

Extractions may be required as a result of severe gum disease as progressive infection leads to the degeneration of the connective tissue that secures the teeth to the bone. This leads to loose, painful teeth. An infection in one tooth can affect the neighbouring teeth. It is important to remove the severely infected teeth to save the remaining teeth and prevent a cascade of infection in the mouth.

Feline resorptive lesions

Cats often have to suffer in silence due to severe pain from teeth affected by a condition called resorptive lesions. Resorptive lesions in cats are extremely common and we still do not know the exact cause. What we do know is that it is likely an immune mediated process of the cells that are responsible for tooth remodelling. In this situation, the odontoclast cells are out of control and 'eat away' at the tooth often until the entire tooth is lost, causing major oral pain for the cat in the process.

Affected teeth need to be extracted. Your vet may recommend dental x-rays if a resorptive lesion is detected.

Stomatitis

Stomatitis is widespread inflammation of the lining of the oral cavity. Sometimes there is minimal tartar present but due to an abnormal immune process, the gums become severely inflamed, leading to catastrophic gum disease. In these cases, multiple mouth extractions may be required to allow healing of the gums.

Prior to dental work, these cats are in severe pain and may refuse to eat dry food, have excessive drooling and a foul smelling breath. These cases require urgent dental treatment. I find these cats are so much happier after their painful condition has been treated. Owners often tell me their cats are a lot more affectionate towards family members and more active as early as a few days after dental work.

Fractured teeth

Cats may fracture their canine (fang) teeth as a result of trauma. Usually the problem is not noticed until a vet examines the mouth at the annual check up. If the pulp cavity (central life line of the tooth) is exposed as a result of the fracture, then the tooth is dead and eventually a tooth root abscess forms because bacteria can migrate through the exposed pulp. This process is painful and so affected teeth should be extracted.

Teeth brushing

As a general rule, it is difficult to introduce tooth brushing to adult cats. They usually let you know who's boss pretty quickly, not to mention the dangers of teeth and claws! If you would like to consider brushing your kitty's teeth, introduce him or her to the process as a kitten under the age of 16 weeks. Never use human toothpaste as this is not safe if swallowed. There are beef and chicken flavoured toothpastes available at your vet hospital.

I would personally rather just have my cat's teeth scaled and polished when required than brush them daily, but it depends on the personality of your cat and the owner's patience!

For further tips on how to keep your cat's mouth healthy and pain-free, visit www.sydneyvetdentistry.com.au to learn more.



Cat with stomatitis under anaesthetic prior to tooth extraction



Dr Gretta Howard graduated from the University of Sydney in 1999. She worked in mixed veterinary practice in country NSW for two years and then in private practice in Sydney from 2001-2004. During this time, she completed a four year part-time Masters Degree in Veterinary Studies through Murdoch University.

Gretta then worked as a locum vet in approximately 20 UK practices throughout the English countryside. On the way home to Australia, she worked in Sikkim, India with Vets Beyond Borders as a volunteer. In 2006, she was successful in gaining Membership into the Small Animal Medicine chapter of the Australian and New Zealand College of Veterinary Scientists.

She contributes monthly vet articles to her local newspaper The Village Observer and has written articles for The Veterinarian magazine.

Since her return to Australia, Gretta has worked in private practice in Sydney and is currently practising at Cherrybrook Veterinary Hospital in Sydney's Hills District. She has always had a love for cats ever since she was a child and is a member of the Cat Protection Society of NSW.