

Feline Dental Disease

Every year, February is dubbed dental month in veterinary hospitals nationwide. While we aspire to heighten feline dentistry this February, we also recognize that feline dental care is essential year-round.

Most cats are unable to brush their teeth daily and are not typically amenable to human assistance in that department. If tooth brushing is introduced in kittenhood and routinely performed, it can decrease the progression of dental plaque into dental calculus (known as tartar in humans) and the subsequent development of periodontal disease.

The Physical Exam

Even if you have accomplished the feat of brushing your cat's teeth, routine dental evaluation is still recommended and can be performed during your kitty's physical exam by your veterinarian. And if, like most cat owners, you are unable to routinely brush your cat's teeth, an oral exam is even more critical. On physical exam, your veterinarian can evaluate for the signs and stages of dental disease, including severity of dental calculus accumulation, gingivitis, and/or tooth resorption (more discussion on that later). Your veterinarian can also evaluate for other types of oral lesions.

Dental disease

The most common dental disease is periodontal disease, which originates from plaque. The periodontium consists of all the tissues securing teeth in place. Periodontitis is the inflammatory process that erodes the periodontium (and can ultimately lead to a tooth loosening and/or falling out).

As mentioned previously, periodontal disease originates with plaque. Plaque is an oral biofilm of bacteria that covers the tooth surface. With the addition of mineral-containing saliva, calculus forms and continues to have an active biofilm (plaque) on its surface. While plaque and calculus themselves may not automatically progress into periodontal disease, they are its necessary precursors. Other signs such as severity of gingivitis and overall gingival health can be evaluated on physical exam to help determine whether dental treatment is indicated.

Another type of common dental disease, tooth resorption, may also be apparent on physical exam. In this disease, the tooth begins to erode and can be uncomfortable for your kitty (placing pressure on these lesions will often produce a "chatter" movement of the patient's mouth, due to discomfort). It is not clear what causes these resorptive lesions—sometimes there is adjacent periodontal disease, but not necessarily—and they appear to affect approximately 30% of the feline population. Hence, even those kitties whose teeth are brushed or who do not appear prone to periodontal disease could still develop tooth resorption lesions.

Treatment

If there are signs of periodontal disease, your veterinarian will most likely recommend a complete oral health assessment and treatment (COHAT), also known as a dental procedure, which will entail anesthesia, full-mouth dental x-rays, scaling, polishing, and extractions of diseased teeth. Although many kitty caregivers express hesitation at the mention of an anesthetic procedure, the benefits are generally appreciated after the kitty has recovered from the dentistry. Often, a kitty's human parents will remark on postoperative improvements in their kitty's appetite, activity, and interactivity with their human cohabitants.