

### **The Importance of Dental Care for Dogs and Cats** *Part 2 of a 3 - part series by Stephen Riback, DVM*

Like people, our pets are prone to dental disease. The month of February focuses on the importance of controlling and preventing dental disease in our cats and dogs. Untreated dental disease is associated with both infection and pain. Recent studies in people and dogs show that untreated infection in the mouth has also been linked to infections in other parts of their bodies.

#### **Feline Odontoclastic Resorptive Lesions**

The most common dental disorder in domestic cats is a decay of the teeth called Tooth Resorption (TR). This is present in 50-75% of all cats presenting for dental procedures. We do not know what initiates the process, but we do know that a cell within the tooth called an odontoclast gets “turned on” and removes calcium from within the tooth structure. These teeth then start to decay, often from the inside out. This is different from “cariious decay”, or cavities in people, that begins from the outside surface of the tooth. When these lesions break through to the surface of the tooth, they become painful. The only approved treatment for TR is extraction of the affected teeth. Many cats are living with TR and do not show overt signs. Some cats may have difficulty eating dry food or avoid using teeth with TR present and some cats may have jaw “chattering” while chewing.



The diagnosis and treatment of TR involves general anesthesia. Animals should be prescreened to ensure they are good anesthetic candidates before undergoing a dental procedure. This often involves a thorough physical exam, blood tests and sometimes x-rays of the heart and lungs, or echocardiograms of the heart. Once a patient is safely anesthetized, the teeth should be cleaned to evaluate for dental disease. Probing around the surface of every tooth in a cat will screen for TR. In the early

stages, a TR may look like a small hole within the tooth. As TR progresses, more destruction of the tooth may be present. Often times, gum tissue will grow over the exposed TR giving the appearance of the gums growing onto the tooth surface. “Intra-oral” or dental X-Rays can also be taken to help diagnose TR. Many practices now have “digital” or computerized dental X-Rays that do not need dental films and require much less radiation than the old X-Rays. The combination of dental probing and X-Rays can help determine the best treatment for an individual patient. Many cat owners report that after successfully extracting teeth with TR, their cats seem happier and more active. Cats seem to thrive better with extracted teeth, versus painful teeth.

Some TRs seem to be associated with inflammation at the gum line. Often TR will develop independent of gingival inflammation. Keeping gingivitis under control may help prevent some TR, but many are not preventable. Cats who develop TR in some teeth will usually develop new TR in other teeth in the future, so annual oral examinations are recommended to identify new lesions as they develop.

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