

Ask the Vet

Christine E. Hunt, DVM

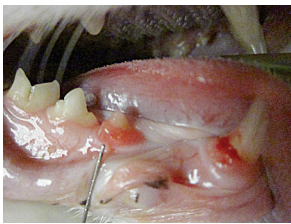


Dr. Christine E. Hunt received her B.S. in Zoology from N.C. State University, cum laude, followed by her veterinary doctorate from Oklahoma State University. She has practiced small animal medicine, dentistry and surgery in Greensboro for 33 years. In 2003, she opened University Animal Hospital. Her interests lie in geriatric medicine, pain management and advanced dentistry.

Q When my cat is chewing his food, he tilts his head to one side to chew. Sometimes he bites down on his dry food, then drops it like it hurts. What could be causing this?

A Your cat may be experiencing tooth pain from a common disease known as Feline Tooth Resorption. This painful condition occurs when inflammation of the gum stimulates cells called odontoclasts to dissolve different parts of the tooth.

Your cat is most likely chewing on one side of his mouth to avoid contact between his diseased tooth and the hard food. There are three types of resorptive lesions that could affect your cat's tooth. The dental picture and x-ray shown below illustrate the different types of resorptive conditions.



Type 1 lesions typically affect the enamel crown. As the condition progresses, the crown can fracture or break off, leaving an intact root system. Intact roots can abscess and cause chronic oral pain. You may see a space where a tooth crown should be.

Type 2 lesions occur when the tooth's root system is resorbed and replaced by bone. The enamel crowns can fracture off and eventually become covered by gum tissue. The resorbed roots are not typically painful once this process is complete.

Type 3 lesions are a combination of both the Type 1 and Type 2 lesions.

In the first picture, the first small premolar has a Type 3 resorptive lesion. The first root is resorbing. The second root is intact, the crown is dissolving and the gum is growing over the crown. The second picture shows a classic Type 2 lesion. The crown looks relatively normal but the entire root system is destroyed.

Q My cat has red gum tissue growing on one side of his lower teeth. What should I do for this?

A Whenever gum tissue is anywhere other than at the normal gum line, there is a high probability of serious dental disease. Your kitty needs to have an oral exam to help determine the extensiveness of the disease process.

Then under anesthesia, dental x-rays are used to determine whether your kitty has Type 1, 2 or 3 Tooth Resorptive Disease.

Extractions are recommended for any stage of tooth resorption. In advanced stages of Type 2 dental disease, in which the roots have completely been resorbed by surrounding bone, a crown amputation may be recommended.

Crown amputation is only performed in this condition because there is no longer any alveolar space between the tooth root and bone, and the root canal is gone. Only dental radiographs can determine what types of resorptive lesions are occurring below the gum line.

Q My cat's mouth really smells bad and she will only eat canned food. Does she have an infection?

A Yes! A healthy oral cavity should not have a foul odor. Fetid breath is typically due to an abscessed tooth, which should be extracted as soon as possible.

The bacteria from an abscessed tooth are continually absorbed into the bloodstream and can cause other systemic conditions such as hepatitis or kidney infections.

Q How can I keep tartar from forming now that my new kitten has her adult teeth?

A There are several great ways to prevent plaque and tartar from accumulating on your cat's teeth. Nothing works better than daily brushing with flavored enzymatic veterinary toothpaste. Just like we care for our own teeth, you should be removing the plaque that accumulates on your cat's teeth after each meal.

Since a cat has a very small mouth, you can use a gauze square or soft cloth wrapped around your pinky finger to remove the plaque gently. Start training cats when they are young to accept dental care, then brushing becomes a daily routine.

Older cats may not adjust to tooth brushing, so try adding a dental diet to each meal. Dental diets are specially formulated to remove plaque mechanically. When the cat bites down on the kibble, it does not break apart. Instead, its chewy center goes up to the gum line and mechanically removes the plaque.

Some dental diets even contain calcium binders which keep the calcium in saliva from hardening plaque into tartar. Dental tartar is the hard yellow deposit that accumulates on teeth when plaque is not removed by brushing.

Q If I brush my cat's teeth every day, will I still need to have them cleaned?

A Yes. Your cat will still need its teeth cleaned approximately every 12 to 24 months. Again, just like humans, a thorough dental exam, cleaning, polish and tooth sealant is needed on a regular basis to maintain a healthy mouth. It is what we can't see below the gum line that makes it necessary for regular checkups.

During January, University Animal Hospital is offering a 20% discount on dental cleaning. Call 279-1003 to schedule an appointment for your pet.

University Animal Hospital
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