

I hear more and more about needing to brush your pet's teeth. Can my cat get cavities if I don't brush them?

Dental disease is a very common problem in cats. While they do not get cavities exactly the same as people, they commonly suffer tooth destruction by a process known as resorptive lesions. In this disease the hard surface of the tooth is eroded away at the gum line. The sensitive pulp cavity becomes exposed and a very painful condition results. The exact cause of resorptive lesions is unknown, despite much research by veterinary dentists. Several possibilities are suggested including periodontal disease and inflammation, infection, micro-fractures in the surface of the tooth secondary to movement while chewing, or excess levels of vitamin D. For any of these reasons, odontoclasts (cells that are responsible for absorbing the roots of baby teeth) destroy the layers of the tooth, from the outside layer of enamel inward. Sometimes the roots of the affected tooth are left intact, while in some patients the tooth root is destroyed. Treatment of resorptive lesions involves extracting the tooth, as the hole in the tooth cannot be filled as in people with cavities in their teeth. Dental x-rays are needed to determine if there is still a tooth root requiring surgical extraction, or if simply extracting the tooth crown will suffice.

What can you do to prevent resorptive lesions in your cat? Home dental care is important. Brushing teeth daily is ideal. Your veterinarian can demonstrate and there are numerous on-line tutorials and videos to demonstrate the appropriate technique. My advice is to start slow. Make sure your cat is comfortable sitting still in your lap or on a table while you massage the gums and teeth with your finger and a little water for a few days before you introduce a brush or toothpaste. As you work your way to introducing toothpaste, use only toothpaste made for pets. It comes in yummy flavors such as tuna or chicken. If your cat won't tolerate brushing, there are many other oral care products available. Enzymatic products can be added to the food or water. There are gels that can be quickly wiped along the gum line, or dental sprays if your cat will tolerate them. Try some dental treats or chews, but observe your cat while she is consuming these products to avoid choking or stomach upset. Your veterinarian can help you choose effective products. Some will have a "seal of approval" from the Veterinary Oral Health Council. Finally, have your cat's teeth examined by your veterinarian every 6 to 12 months. A full oral exam, looking for resorptive lesions, tumors and periodontal disease will ensure your cat receives professional dental care early, to prevent pain and the

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