

# Oral Tumors in Cats

A Brief Guide • Part of the Educational Pet Disease Series from Lap of Love

## Signs & Symptoms

### Initial Symptoms

- Bleeding from the mouth
- Dental disease
- Nausea, vomiting
- Turning away from food
- Stops chewing or chews only on one side of the mouth, drops food
- Lack of grooming

### Intermediate Symptoms

- Bad breath
- Weight loss
- Drooling, salivation
- Lethargic, unwilling to play
- Stops chewing on treats/toys
- Loss of healthy teeth

### Advanced Symptoms

- Facial/jaw deformity
- Bulging eye(s)
- Head shy
- Pain upon opening mouth
- Quiet or clingy behavior
- Nasal discharge or bleeding

Before your pet's condition becomes unmanageable or they are losing quality of life, it is important to begin end-of-life care discussions. Learn about pet hospice care and/or euthanasia services in your area so you are prepared.

## What Is It?

Oral tumors are one of the four most common cancers in cats; they are defined as a tumor that arises from the teeth, bone, tongue, back of the throat, and soft tissue of the upper and lower jaw. Feline oral tumors account for approximately 10-20% of all tumors. Of this percentage, most are malignant (cancerous), though a small percentage are benign (non-cancerous). The most common oral tumor found among cats is squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) accounting for 75% or more of all documented oral tumors every year. Other possible malignant tumors include osteosarcoma, melanoma, and lymphoma. Typically, a mass is found within the oral cavity or extending from the oral cavity in conjunction with other symptoms noticed at home. Common symptoms can include drooling/increased salivation, dropping food/difficulty eating or changes in how the cat chews or approaches the feeding dish, losing weight, vomiting, significant dental disease, inappropriate loss of healthy teeth, bad breath, bloody saliva, facial deformities, bulging of the eyes, and nasal discharge including blood.

## Diagnosis

Suspicion of an oral problem starts at home with the symptoms previously mentioned. Upon examination at a veterinary visit, in some pets, the presence of a mass in and around the structures of the oral cavity may be noticed. Based on these suspicions with or without physical exam findings, preliminary diagnostics generally include a broad base of bloodwork, urinalysis, oral exam (often under sedation or anesthesia), and x-rays of the chest and skull to try and gather information. If an abnormal area or mass is found, cytological analysis (microscopic examination), or biopsy of the mass can confirm a definitive diagnosis. Once diagnosed, if malignant, advanced diagnostics help to "stage" the oral tumor, providing information about tumor size, location, severity, and spread which will direct treatment, planning, and prognosis. Advanced imaging, such as computer tomography (CT) scans, MRI, abdominal ultrasound are recommended in preparation for treatment and to determine possible metastasis, or spread of the cancer.

## Treatment and Management

Treatment is centered around either palliation or aggressive therapy. Unfortunately, SCC tumors are often very large by the time of diagnosis, decreasing the success rate of surgical management. The prognosis is often poor and therapy may focus on palliative surgical de-bulking, radiation, and chemotherapy. Further investigation into multi-modal therapy is needed. Fibrosarcomas, locally invasive but minimally metastatic tumors, may be cured with radical surgery, best performed by a boarded veterinary surgeon, with relatively low reoccurrence rates. Additional radiation at the site of surgery may be necessary for residual cancerous cells missed surgically. Chemotherapy is not considered beneficial for drug resistant fibrosarcomas. Pain medications, soft food, feeding tubes, appetite stimulants, antibiotics, steroids, and other palliative medications are employed on a case by case basis to help control the overall comfort of the cat and maintain quality of life for as long as possible.

## Prognosis

The prognosis for feline oral tumors depends on the type, behavior, size, location, extent of local invasion and metastasis, as well as the concurrent disease status

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of the pet. Early detection, regardless of the type of malignant tumor, presents a better prognosis. The reoccurrence rate of squamous cell carcinomas is very high, and it is not considered a curable cancer. Even with radiation, surgery, or chemotherapy the survival time is typically 2-6 months. In general, oral tumors in felines are considered to have a poor to grave prognosis, however, with any diagnosis, have a detailed discussion with your veterinarian, a veterinary oncologist, and possibly a veterinary surgeon regarding the best options and plan for your cat.

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## *Management Tips*

### *Consider providing:*

- Easily accessible water
- Consistently portioned meals
- Wet food only to decrease oral pain
- A moist, high calorie, prescription food
- Short term feeding tube use
- Appetite stimulants
- Aggressive pain management
- Elevated feeding dishes
- Feeding dishes away from other pets
- Room temp. water to avoid oral pain
- Water additives for oral health

### *Try to:*

- Be consistent with medications
- Have your cat's teeth cleaned often
- Always have a yearly examination
- Touch your cat's mouth often to be able to examine when needed
- Avoid smoking around your pet
- Meal feed, not free feed, your cat to monitor appetite and eating behavior
- Brush you cat's teeth and pay close attention to overall oral hygiene (when teeth/gums are healthy)
- Track appetite, urination, drinking, weight, vomiting, diarrhea, energy, etc.
- Limit stress (kids, noise)
- Keep up with preventative care
- Address concerns ASAP
- Avoid giving hard treats, playing games that involve the mouth, etc.
- Keep the fur around the mouth well groomed, combed, cleaned and have nails trimmed to prevent trauma from scratching and grooming