

Oral Tumors

Tumors in the mouth are common in dogs and cats, but may not be initially obvious to the owner. Tumors are classified as malignant or benign. There are also other causes of swelling of tissues in the mouth: gingival hyperplasia (generalized overgrowth of the gum tissue) is common in dogs and occasionally in cats, and is not tumor-related. Other non-tumorous causes of swelling of the oral tissues can include a local infection or collection of saliva from a damaged salivary gland.

Types of Tumors

Malignant tumors, or cancerous, can invade the adjacent tissues and possibly spread to other parts of the body.

Benign tumors, or non-cancerous, do not spread to other parts of the body, but they may still grow to be large and destructive.

It is tempting to try to guess the tumor type from the visual appearance of an oral growth (i.e., its surface color and texture, the contour of the tumor, and size and location). However, an accurate diagnosis (leading to an accurate prognosis and identification of the appropriate treatment options) usually requires dental X-rays and a biopsy. **All oral growths should be fully investigated by a specialist; a “wait and see” approach is not appropriate in these situations.**

If the specialist feels an abnormality of one of the lymph nodes in the neck a biopsy or needle aspiration of the abnormal lymph node, chest X-rays, and/or CT/MRI imaging may be recommended.

Surgery for Oral Tumors

For most oral tumors (benign and malignant), surgical removal offers the best chance of a cure. In some cases, surgery may only need to remove small areas of gum, teeth or bone. In other cases, surgery is more radical and may need to remove a part or all of a jaw, including teeth and bone. This depends on which type of tumor is being treated, and that is why biopsy is so important. Though dogs tolerate radical surgery very well, cats may take a little longer to recover full function. In cases where surgery is not practical or is not desired by the owner, referral to a veterinary oncologist may reveal additional treatment options including medication and radiation therapy.



Animal Dental Services

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Veterinary Specialists

Because there are so many types of oral tumors that can occur in dogs and cats, each with a different prognosis, management by a board-certified veterinary dental specialist or oncologist is recommended. Your family veterinarian may take a biopsy and then refer the case to a specialist.

What Can Pet Owners Do to Be Pro-Active About Oral Tumors?

The key is early detection of the growth. Owners that are in the habit of brushing their pet's teeth every day (recommended) are likely to note any changes in the mouth earlier.

If you are not brushing their pet's teeth daily, your family veterinarian recommends a weekly oral inspection by the owner, in addition to regular examination. When a swelling in the mouth is noted, seek the services of your family veterinarian or a veterinary dental specialist without delay.