



ANIMAL EMERGENCY CENTER

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at the heart of critical care

ORAL SQUAMOUS CELL CARCINOMA IN CATS

INTRODUCTION

Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC), which arises from the cells lining the oral cavity, is the most common oral cancer encountered in cats and humans. While oral SCC has the potential to both aggressively invade local tissue and spread to other parts of the body, it is often the local effects of the tumor that cause the most problems. We do not know what causes SCC to occur in cats, but in humans it is associated with activities such as drinking alcohol, smoking and chewing tobacco.

DIAGNOSIS AND STAGING

Many cats with oral SCC will display signs such as drooling, foul odor, bleeding from the mouth, or difficulty eating. Some cats may present with signs suggesting a dental problem, and SCC is diagnosed as an underlying cause of the dental disease. A diagnosis of SCC usually requires a biopsy. This is sometimes performed during routine dentistry or can be performed using quick-acting injectable sedation or a very short anesthetic.

Prior to devising a treatment plan, some tests will often be performed to determine overall health and if the tumor is localized to the primary site or whether there is any evidence of spread. These tests include blood tests evaluating blood cell numbers and organ function, a fine needle aspirate of the lymph node draining the tumor area, and x-rays of the lungs.

TREATMENT AND PROGNOSIS

Whenever possible, surgery is the first line of defense for SCC. Unfortunately due to the very small size of a cat's mouth and the relatively large size of the tumor when it is usually diagnosed, surgery is possible in less than 10% of cases. When surgery can be performed, very aggressive surgery, often requiring removal of parts of the upper or lower jaw, is recommended because of this cancer's ability to deeply invade bone and other deep structures in the mouth.

In cases where surgery is not possible or has been declined another form of local therapy, radiation therapy can be used. This involves the application of a powerful form of radiation directly onto the tumor. By itself radiation therapy is rarely associated with tumor shrinkage but has the potential to decrease pain associated with this type of cancer. The radiation therapy protocol recommended for SCC in cats consists of four weekly treatments.

There are several chemotherapy drugs that have been studied for the treatment of SCC in cats. The likelihood of a patient experiencing meaningful tumor shrinkage with chemotherapy is less than 10%, but the tumor may shrink a small amount or stop growing for a time. Chemotherapy for this type of cancer is typically given once every 3 weeks, starting with 2 treatments and then determining whether there is benefit of further therapy.

Chemotherapy is generally well tolerated with some cats experiencing mild side effects that usually go away without treatment. Less than 5% of cats experience severe side effects that would require hospitalization and supportive care.

The use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs may be useful for cats with SCC. These drugs (meloxicam and piroxicam) may help to slow tumor growth, especially when combined with radiation or other chemotherapy drugs. In addition, these medications are also potent pain relievers.

One of the most important issues in cats with SCC is quality of life. Often cats with SCC are unable to take in sufficient food and water due to pain. If this pain cannot be controlled with the above measures, quality of life is usually very poor. Unfortunately we are able to cure very few cats with SCC. The goal of treatment is to do as much as we can to maintain an excellent quality of life for as long as possible.