

FACTSHEET No 10 . Squamous Cell Carcinoma in Cats (SCC)

Squamous Cell Carcinoma (SCC) is a common malignant tumour of the skin - Skin Cancer, most often caused by excessive exposure to sunlight. It is seen most often in white cats or cats with white patches.

Tumours can appear anywhere on the body although areas most commonly affected are the ears, nose, mouth and eyelids. Older outdoor cats are more commonly affected than young ones, or indoor cats.

SCC's are slow to metastasis (spread) and remain confined to the skin for some time. If untreated, SCC can spread to regional lymph nodes and distant metastasis, most often the lungs. The cat in Figure 1 has been positively diagnosed with SCC on both of its ears. The small amount of redness and the minor scabs are the only apparent lesions. It has been prepped for surgery and the amputation of both ears is about to begin.



Figure 1: SCC on a cat's ear.

Symptoms

- Reddening of the ear tip (likely to be the first symptom)
- Lesions or sores which are slow to heal
- Mild hair loss, or flaking of the skin in the affected area
- Red spot on the skin
- Crusty like lesions

If you see any lumps, bumps, scabs, crusty areas etc on your cat, it is strongly urged to seek Veterinary attention. Some symptoms of SCC can mimic other diseases such as ringworm, so it is important that you seek a proper diagnosis so the appropriate treatments can be given.

Diagnosis

A complete medical history and physical examination will be performed by your veterinarian.

A presumptive diagnosis of squamous cell carcinoma may possibly be made by examining the cat. However a biopsy will be required to confirm this diagnosis

A chest x-ray may be performed to determine if the cancer has spread

A complete blood count and biochemical blood profile will be required.

Treatment

- Surgery to remove the cancerous cells (partial pinnectomy - ear tip removal)
- Surgical removal of facial lesions, mass or sore crusted areas
- Cryosurgery to remove the cancerous cells
- Chemotherapy or radiation therapy
- Pain medication post operatively



Figure 2: Same cat four weeks after surgery.

Prevention

- Limiting your cats exposure to the sun by confining him/her indoors during the hours of 10am-4pm on hot, sunny days.
- Application of a waterproof suncream -SPF 15 or greater, twice daily onto ear tips (especially white ears)
- Early detection is important so your veterinarian may wish to take a biopsy to determine if your cat has sunburn or squamous cell carcinoma
- If you believe your cat has been sunburned seek veterinary attention. Treatment depends on the severity of the burn.



Figure 3: Oral SCC in a cat.

There is also an oral version of SCC which is particularly aggressive. Average age at diagnosis is 12, so it usually occurs in older cats. Tumours can occur anywhere in the mouth or jaw. Under the tongue, called the sublingual area is where it is found most often. These tumours grow rapidly and prognosis becomes poor, so early detection is vital.

This is another affirmation of the need for complete physical exams in cats, especially as they age. Older cats need more frequent exams to catch this disease and other geriatric diseases before they have progressed too far.

Typical symptoms of this type of SCC include -

- Halitosis (bad breath)
- Dysphagia (difficulty eating)
- Salivating

Although, all of the above may just mean that dental work is needed.

Although being the mysterious creatures they can be, the oral SCC can be present without any outward signs. It is said that cats exposed to tobacco smoke have an increased chance of getting oral SCC. This is the same for cats that only eat canned (wet) food, possibly due to build-up of tartar. Dry food helps to break down tartar, therefore maintaining better oral hygiene - less risk.

It is important to make a correct diagnosis early in the course of the disease because it can significantly affect the final outcome. The primary method of diagnosis for this disease is a skin biopsy. Any suspicious lesion should be biopsied because the prognosis is much more favourable the earlier the treatment. Any of the symptoms described above could be indicative of SCC so veterinary advice should be sought immediately.