Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) is the most common oral tumor in cats, followed by fibrosarcoma and melanoma. Signs include weight loss, trouble eating and swallowing, bad breath odor, drooling, bleeding, and, sometimes, swelling on the jaw or in the mouth.

These tumors commonly grow under the tongue, and cats are often secretive about their ailments. Therefore, we often discover these tumors quite late, at a point where they have grown to a decent size or where they have already invaded into bone. Cats need their tongue, and a tumor growing at the tongue’s base is very problematic in terms of treatment. A location that is amenable to surgery is generally best.

These tumors can be both locally invasive into the tissues of the mouth and metastatic to other organs of the body; however, most remain localized to the oral cavity. Prior to treatment, we recommend a series of diagnostics to evaluate overall health and extent of tumor spread. Often, we recommend a CT scan which can also be used, if we are not sure, to evaluate the potential for surgical removal of the primary tumor.

The problem here is that most, when diagnosed, are not amendable to surgical removal. A cat’s mouth is small, and there is not much tissue to spare. If the tumor is small and surgically removable, that is the best course of treatment. However, we rarely if ever get this chance. As for chemotherapy/medical treatment, it’s been shown to be generally unrewarding. There are situations where it would be recommended, but expectations for success are low with this tumor type. Radiation can also be tried and can be temporarily palliative, but radiation most often is not a cure. There are some experiments combining radiation and chemotherapy treatment and using beads of chemotherapy directly into the tumor tissue, but even so, we are still searching for more effective agents than the ones we know. Research funding is still needed to help us develop and assess novel treatments for this disease. Until then, unless they are small and removable, our primary goal of treatment is to improve life quality as much as possible.

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