

# Feline Tooth Resorption (FORLs): A Common but Painful Dental Problem in Cats

If your cat suddenly seems hesitant to eat, starts dropping food, or reacts when you touch their mouth, **tooth resorption** may be the reason. Also called **feline odontoclastic resorptive lesions (FORLs)** or simply **resorptive lesions**, this is one of the **most common and painful dental diseases in cats** — often hidden beneath the gums where you can't see it.

The good news? With proper diagnosis and treatment, affected cats can return to eating comfortably and living pain-free.

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## What Is Tooth Resorption?

Tooth resorption happens when the body's own cells, called **odontoclasts**, begin to **break down and absorb the tooth structure** — starting with the outer enamel and dentin.

Over time, this process causes holes or lesions in the teeth. Eventually, it can lead to **exposure of the sensitive inner pulp**, causing significant pain.

In advanced stages, the crown of the tooth may even break off, leaving only the root behind under the gums.

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## How Common Is It?

Tooth resorption is **extremely common** in cats — studies show that **more than half of adult cats** will develop at least one affected tooth in their lifetime.

Any breed or age can be affected, but it's most often seen in **middle-aged to older cats**.

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## Causes and Risk Factors

The exact cause isn't fully understood, but several factors seem to play a role, including:

- **Genetics** – Some cats may be more prone to developing lesions.
- **Chronic inflammation or dental disease** – Gingivitis and periodontal disease can contribute.

- **Diet and nutrition** – Certain minerals or imbalances may increase risk.
- **Mechanical stress** – Repeated wear and tear on teeth may trigger the process.

Unfortunately, once resorption starts, it tends to **progress over time**.

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## Signs of Tooth Resorption in Cats

Cats are masters at hiding pain, so the signs can be subtle. Watch for:

- **Dropping food or chewing on one side of the mouth**
- **Decreased appetite** or reluctance to eat hard food
- **Pawing at the mouth or drooling**
- **Bleeding from the mouth or bad breath**
- **Behavior changes** – hiding, irritability, or reluctance to play
- **Chattering or jaw trembling** when the lesion is touched

Sometimes, there are **no visible signs** at all — which is why regular veterinary dental exams are so important.

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## How Are Resorptive Lesions Diagnosed?

A **complete oral exam under anesthesia** is usually needed for an accurate diagnosis. Your veterinarian will:

1. **Inspect all teeth visually and with a dental probe**, looking for defects along the gumline.
2. **Take dental X-rays (radiographs)** – these are essential, because many lesions occur below the gumline where they can't be seen.

Dental X-rays often reveal early lesions long before they cause visible damage.

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## Treatment Options

Unfortunately, once tooth resorption begins, it **cannot be stopped or reversed**. Treatment focuses on **removing the painful tooth** and restoring comfort.

### 1. Tooth Extraction

- The most effective treatment.
- Removes the source of pain and prevents further inflammation.
- Depending on the lesion type, a **full extraction** or **crown amputation** (removing the crown but leaving healthy roots to resorb naturally) may be performed.

### 2. Pain Management

After surgery, your cat will receive pain medication and sometimes antibiotics. Most cats recover quickly and eat better within days.

### 3. Preventive Care

While we can't prevent tooth resorption entirely, **routine dental care** helps detect problems early. This includes:

- Annual (or semi-annual) veterinary dental exams
- Dental X-rays as recommended
- Regular tooth brushing (if your cat allows!) or dental diets/chews

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## Living with a Cat After Dental Surgery

Owners are often amazed at how quickly their cats bounce back after painful teeth are removed. Cats don't need all their teeth to eat well — once the source of discomfort is gone, they typically regain appetite, energy, and playfulness.

Most cats do beautifully with **partial or even full-mouth extractions**, enjoying soft food comfortably for years to come.

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## When to Call Your Veterinarian

Schedule a dental evaluation if you notice:

- Your cat dropping food, drooling, or pawing at the mouth
- Changes in eating habits or appetite
- Bad breath or bleeding gums
- Difficulty grooming
- Any visible changes to the teeth or gums

Early detection is key — addressing tooth resorption before it progresses helps prevent severe pain and tooth loss. Regular veterinary dental checkups and X-rays are the best way to catch it early and keep your cat comfortable