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Cat Haven Information Sheet – CAT FIGHT WOUNDS

Injuries from cat fight wounds can be serious in terms of the pain and suffering your cat might endure and the cost of veterinary treatment of the abscesses that result. As well as that, the Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (Feline AIDS) is transmitted via bite wounds.

Cat saliva and to a lesser extent the material on their claws can harbour a wide range of very nasty bacteria. Problems occur when those bacteria find their way under the skin. Bite wounds are the worst because the offending tooth can penetrate deep into the victim's tissue. When the tooth withdraws it leaves bacteria behind – basically a hypodermic injection of bacteria. Infection is rapid and the body's response is to attempt to wall the infection off. Pus is produced very quickly. An abscess forms and these can be very large – from golf ball to tennis ball sized.

Abscesses are very painful. Cats with a Cat Bite Abscess (CBA) have a fever, usually go off their food and are very tender over the bite wound. You may feel a soft fluid mass. In severe cases bacteria can be released into the bloodstream causing septicaemia. If left untreated the abscess will eventually burst through the skin, leaving a large ulcer. Often, the ulcer will develop an airtight crust and the abscess will reform. Alternatively it may seem to heal but then recur.

Treatment

Veterinary treatment of CBAs usually requires a general anaesthetic as they are very painful. If the abscess has not burst it may be as simple as lancing the abscess and inserting a soft rubber drain so that fluid can escape and oxygen can get in. If the abscess has already burst it means the skin over the abscess is usually in very poor shape. Damaged skin is trimmed back to healthy skin and then sutured close after inserting a drain. The area may be very large indeed – abscesses on the tail base and lower back can be very extensive.

Sometimes it is not possible to suture the area. On the lower limbs and on the tail, for example, the wound may be trimmed back and left as an open wound to heal. Antibiotics are always given for the treatment of abscesses. Pain relief is often given. In rare cases abscesses may be caused by resistant strains of bacteria or with micro-organisms such as Nocardia or Mycobacterium. That can be expensive! A swab for bacterial culture will be needed if the abscess resists treatment. Nocardial abscesses may never heal!

What can you do?

- Prevent fighting in the first place. Keep your cats indoors, especially at night when most roaming and fighting takes place.
- If you know your cat has been in a fight and is off-colour or limping or refusing food/showing signs of pain, an early trip to the vet may save you a lot of money in the long run. Administration of antibiotics before the abscess has had a chance to form has a high success rate. Pain relief will help your cat recover quickly.
- If the abscess has already burst, clip away the surrounding hair so you can assess how big the damaged area is. Occasionally, with thrice daily irrigation of the wound with dilute Betadine, the ulcer will heal. Unfortunately, you run the risk of getting bitten yourself and the abscess often returns. Seek veterinary help.
- Consider vaccinating your cat against FIV.
- Consider Pet Insurance!