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Ear Polyps

What are Inflammatory Ear Polyps?

Inflammatory polyps are benign growths that originate in the middle ear of young to middle aged cats. The exact reason for their development is unclear, but is thought to be related to chronic infection within the middle ear. As the polyps enlarge they either break through the ear drum into the ear canal causing irritation and infection or they travel down the eustachian tube into the back of the throat (pharynx) where they can cause difficulty swallowing and breathing. In rare cases a polyp can grow in both directions simultaneously (into the ear canal and throat). Polyps usually occur in one ear, but it is not uncommon to identify them in both middle ears at the same time.

Diagnosis

Cats typically present with a history of chronic ear infections that aren't responding to routine medical management or for making "funny noises" while breathing and / or are having difficulty swallowing food. A presumptive diagnosis is made by visualizing a smooth, grayish mass within the ear canal or at the back of the throat. A definitive diagnosis is made by a pathologist by submitting the mass for biopsy after complete polyp removal. Skull x-rays are often taken prior to surgery to evaluate the inside of the middle ears (osseous bullae) for signs of other disease processes.

Treatment

The treatment of choice is a ventral bulla osteotomy, where the bottom of the osseous bulla (middle ear) is surgically opened allowing for complete removal of the "root" of the polyp to prevent recurrence. If a polyp is removed from the ear canal or throat without removing its "root" from within the middle ear the majority will recur within ~6 months. A ventral bulla osteotomy can also be performed to remove infected debris and provide temporary drainage to the middle ear in cases of chronic otitis media (middle ear infection) where the ear canal is relatively normal. Patients are prescribed antibiotics for 3-4 weeks post-op based on bacterial culture and sensitivity results (identification of a specific bacteria and what kills it). Complications are few, but include Horner's syndrome (one pupil is larger than the other), head tilt (vertigo-like feeling), ongoing middle ear infection and recurrence of the polyp.