MANOR
VETERINARY CLINIC

Dental disease in dogs and cats

How to recognise the signs, treatment and prevention

Dental disease is very common in cats and dogs. After the age of three years, about 70% of pets will have some kind of tooth disorder. If left, these may cause irreversible damage to the teeth, gums and jaw bones. Dental disease can be prevented by stopping the build up of plaque.

Signs of dental disease

Plaque is a deposit of bacteria and debris which forms on the surface of the teeth. At first, it is a thin yellow-white film but in time it hardens and mineralises to become yellowish-brown tartar (also known as calculus) which spreads from the base of the teeth. As well as visible tartar and gum inflammation against the plaque, there may be other signs of disease. Bad breath (halitosis) is very common and severe dental disease can cause difficulties eating because of the pain. If your pet dribbles excessively and is sometimes flecked with blood or shows any signs of pain and discomfort such as shaking the head or pawing at the mouth, they may have dental disease.

How dental disease progresses and affects your pet's health

The main type of dental disease in dogs and cats is periodontal disease, which affects more than 75% of pets over 4 years of age. The cause of problems is the tartar hidden below the gum line. The bacteria in the tartar attack the gum tissue causing painful inflammation (gingivitis). The inflammation and infection tracks down to the tooth roots, destroying the gum's attatchment (periodontal tissue). As the disease becomes advanced it affects the teeth and bone, causing the tooth to fall out.

Bacteria and the toxins they produce are periodically released into the blood stream and can seed throughout the body causing damage to the kidneys, heart, lungs and liver. If there is any existing disease, such as mitral valve disease or kidney disease, the bacteria can make this worse. These secondary problems also increase the risk for a general anaesthetic if left.

Other causes of dental disease in dogs are rare but include fractured teeth from chewing on bone or other hard material, or dental caries. Caries is more common in certain breeds such as Rottweilers. It is similar to human dental disease where the enamel is worn away by plaque and the acidic environment they produce, causing pain when it affects the tooth pulp. It occurs on the large flat molars on the back of the mouth and can be caused by feeding excessive sugary treats.

Cats can get resorption of the enamel without caries, known as Feline Odontoclastic Resorptive Lesions (FORLs) or neck lesions. This disease affects about 30% of cats. There will be gingivitis and areas where the tooth is eroded away may be visible, however a lot of these lesions are underneath the gum and require examination under general anaesthetic and dental xrays to diagnose. In later stages the tooth can fuse with the bone of the jaw so that it is impossible to extract.

Other causes of gingivitis in cats include viral infections such as Feline Calicivirus, Feline Leukaemia Virus (FeLV) or Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV). If these causes are ruled out, it is thought that the gum inflammation is in response to plaque. If cats do not respond to symptomatic treatment they may require extraction of most of their teeth.

Treatment of dental disease

Treatment of dental disease in pets requires a general anaesthetic to allow the vet to fully examine the mouth and explore under the gum line. A full clinical examination is performed and pre-anaesthetic blood screen is recommended, especially in older animals. This will allow the vet to tell if there are any problems with the heart, liver or kidneys and manage these appropriately.

Antibiotics may be prescribed before doing dental work if there are signs of infection to reduce the amount of inflammation and the risk of bacteria being released into the blood stream.

X-rays may be required in advanced periodontal disease to see if there are any deep abscesses affecting the bone, or in cats with FORLs to see if there is any root remaining.

Any loose teeth or those with deep pockets in the gum will need to be extracted because the disease is too advanced to be treated and cannot be reversed.

The vet will then remove the scale from the remaining teeth, usually using an ultrasonic scaler. Finally the teeth will be polished to leave a smooth surface which will slow down the build up of plaque in the future. However, plaque can reform within 12 hours and it is inevitable that dental disease will occur again unless there is ongoing intervention in the form of diligent home care. Otherwise, it is likely that your pet's teeth will require regular scaling and polishing, in some cases at intervals of 6-12 months.

Dental diets

If your pet has had extractions, for the first few days afterwards they will need to be on a diet of soft food. Dry biscuits should help to reduce plaque build up, but some animals, especially toy dogs and those with malocclusions are more prone to dental disease and will require a special diet that is proven to reduce tartar buildup. Hill's t/d is a diet which can reduce visible tartar. Hill's Vet Essentials range have similar biscuits but are meant for the prevention of plaque build up and are best fed from a young age or after a dental procedure. Pedigree Dentastix have also been shown to reduce tartar.

Prevention and home care

Brushing your pet's teeth is the most effective way to prevent dental disease and is as important as brushing your own teeth. Ideally, your pet should get used to having their teeth cleaned fr, Do not use human toothpaste as it froths in the mouth, they dislike the mint flavour and some ingredients can be toxic. The best pet toothpastes contain enzymes to help control bacteria.

Start by gently rubbing a little toothpaste with some soft gauze/cloth wrapped around your finger onto the canine teeth. When your pet is comfortable with this, use your finger to spread some toothpaste along the back teeth and then the incisors at the front.

You can then move on to using a toothbrush specially designed for animals or a children's toothbrush with soft bristles. Finger brushes are also available.
Introduce the toothbrush slowly before brushing thoroughly.
Place the toothpaste between the bristles rather than on top of them to stop the toothpaste just being licked off. Brush using oval motions at the gum edge where the gum and teeth meet. Complete ten short back and forth motions, covering three to four teeth at a time. Pay most attention to the outside of the upper teeth and gently force the bristles into any gaps between the teeth. Be careful not to brush the gum too hard as this can be unpleasant.
Set aside a time every day to brush your pet's teeth so that it becomes part of the regular routine.

Most pets can be trained to accept having their teeth cleaned when approached gently, with patience and perseverance. There are some gels, such as Logic oral hygiene gel and mouth rinses, such as Hexarinse, which can also help to reduce plaque deposits.

If your pet really does not like having their teeth brushed, use Aquadent in the water to help reduce plaque and feed them a dental diet such as Hill's t/d.

Preventative dental care for your pet is very important. Regular brushing of your pet's teeth from a young age can prevent the need for veterinary dental attention often requiring a general anaesthetic.

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