

Dental Disease

Dental disease is the most commonly diagnosed health problem in dogs and cats with 80% dogs and 70% cats having signs of oral disease by age 3. In addition, 10% of dogs have a broken tooth with pulp (nerve or root canal) exposure. This is extremely painful until the nerve dies, at which point the tooth becomes infected! Resorptive lesions (cavities on the gum line) are the most common tooth disease in domestic cats. Studies show that about 28% of domestic cats develop at least one of these painful lesions during their lifetime.



Gum disease (periodontal disease) is a bacterial infection caused by dental plaque and in pets it's often neglected compared to treatment of other diseases. Periodontal disease causes red, swollen and tender gums, receding gums, bleeding, pain and bad breath. If left untreated, periodontitis can lead to tooth loss.

Infectious oral diseases affecting the gums and root canals create systemic bacteremia (bacteria in the blood stream, which can infect other parts of the body). Periodontal inflammation and infection have been linked to numerous problems including heart attacks, strokes, kidney disease, emphysema, liver disease, osteoporosis, pregnancy problems and diabetes. Therefore, oral infectious diseases are known as "the silent killer." In addition to systemic effects, oral disease can also cause inflammation to the eye, resulting in blindness. Furthermore, jaw bone loss from chronic infection can lead to a jaw fracture known as a pathologic fracture, and these have a very hard time healing. Finally, infectious oral disease can result in osteomyelitis (an area of dead, infected bone), nasal infections and an increased risk of oral cancer.

Speaking of oral cancer, the oral cavity is the fourth most common place for cancer. Unfortunately, by the time that most are discovered, they are too advanced for therapy. Early treatment is necessary for cure. That's why you, the pet owner, need to check your pet for oral growths on a regular basis. Anything suspicious should be shown to your veterinarian promptly.

Symptoms of dental disease in animals include yellow and brown tartar build up along the gum line, red inflamed gums or bleeding in the mouth, and persistent bad breath. It is worth checking your pet's mouth every week for any of these signs.

Why does it occur?

Oral disease begins with a build-up of bacteria in the pet's mouth. Bacteria, combined with saliva and food debris between the tooth and gum, can cause plaque formulations that accumulate on the tooth. As bacteria grow in the plaque and as calcium salts are deposited, plaque turns to tartar.

Bacterial plaque is the most important substrate in the development of periodontal disease. The inflammation and destruction that accompanies periodontal disease results from the direct action of bacteria and their by-products on periodontal tissues as well as the indirect activation of the host immune response.

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Without proper preventive or therapeutic care, plaque and tartar build-up leads to periodontal disease, which affects the tissues and structures supporting the teeth. Left untreated, periodontal disease can cause oral pain, dysfunction, tooth loss and systemic complications.

Tartar has a contributory role due to its roughened surface, which enhances bacterial attachment and further plaque development, and also irritates gums.

How can you prevent this...

STEP 1: Take your pet to the vet or veterinary nurse for a dental exam. Don't wait for his annual check-up if you suspect a problem.

STEP 2: Begin a dental care regimen at home. Your vet can suggest steps that may include brushing your pet's teeth. One of the most convenient and effective ways to combat oral disease is feeding specially formulated foods proven effective in combating plaque and tartar build-up. Schedule regular veterinary check-ups. These are essential in helping your veterinarian monitor the progress of your pet's dental health routine. Your veterinary health care team can help you schedule the appropriate visits.

FINALLY: Avoid feeding pets table scraps because they can increase the build-up of plaque and tartar, and can lead to other health problems.

How to get started brushing Your Pet's Teeth.

This is best started as a puppy/kitten, but lots of animals can learn to tolerate this if you are patient and calm.

STEP 1: Introduce a brushing program to pets gradually. Avoid over-restraining your pet and keep brushing sessions short and positive. A cat or small dog can be held in your lap. Praise and reassure your pet throughout the process.

STEP 2: At first, dip a finger into gravy for dogs or tuna water for cats. Rub the soaked finger gently over the pet's mouth and teeth. Make the initial sessions short and positive.

STEP 3: Gradually, introduce gauze over the finger and gently scrub the teeth in a circular motion.

STEP 4: Finally, you can introduce a soft toothbrush designed for pets. Use a sensitive or ultra-soft brush designed for people or a brush designed for pets. Special pet toothbrushes are available from your veterinarian or pet store. Don't use toothpaste designed for people because it could upset the animal's stomach.

Commonly asked questions

My dog eats hard food. Isn't that like brushing his teeth?

ANSWER: NO! This is a myth which came about from the surface of the teeth being slightly cleaner in pets fed dry food. Typical dry food does not protect against periodontal disease. This relates to the root cause of periodontal disease, which is subgingival plaque (plaque below the gumline). Supragingival (above the gumline) plaque accumulates and causes local changes in the gum tissue that allow attachment and growth of subgingival bacteria, however after this has occurred; supragingival plaque has little to no effect on periodontal disease. Traditional dry foods break apart at the tip of the tooth and have little to no dental benefit.

There are specially formulated and processed dental foods that effectively clean a pet's teeth as the pet chews and are an excellent adjunct to routine tooth brushing.

Why does a dental cleaning have to be done under anaesthesia?

ANSWER: It is impossible to do a thorough cleaning and definitive oral examination (including periodontal probing) on a pet who is awake. Your veterinarian can provide the appropriate pre-anaesthetic protocol and treatment plan to provide your pet with the best care.

When is a pet too old to have a dental cleaning?

ANSWER: NEVER. Healthy pets, even when they're older, handle anaesthesia quite well. Age does increase the possibility that the patient will have some degree of organ malfunction, and those with systemic problems will be at an increased risk. Therefore, we recommend pre-operative testing on all patients prior to anaesthesia. The important organs include the liver, kidneys, heart and lungs. Recommended tests include a complete blood panel and urinalysis in all patients. Thyroid testing and thoracic radiographs are recommended in all patients over 6 years.