

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!



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.

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 formations 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.

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.

Symptoms of Dental Disease in Dogs and Cats

Contrary to popular opinion, pets with dental disease rarely go off their food and do continue to behave relatively normally despite in many instances quite severe and significant disease. The symptoms of dental problems are frequently quite subtle and often go unnoticed. Being aware of this will help your pet to obtain treatment when needed.

Dental disease comes in different forms and not all disease is painful. Even when experiencing toothache pets often do not show very obvious signs. They can't tell us they are in pain and do not know they can be helped. They usually carry on suffering quietly.

What might you see inside the mouth?

Visible signs include red, swollen gums which may bleed. Teeth may have exposed roots or be loose. Frequently in cats, teeth might be missing or might have red areas or holes in them indicating tooth resorption. Fractured teeth might be seen but in some cases may be hidden by dental calculus (a hard brown deposit on the tooth). A heavy build-up of calculus in one area is cause for concern.



What other signs might be noticed?

Halitosis (bad breath) is common. Pets may become head shy and may resent their mouths being touched. They may eat on one side or avoid harder foods. They may groom less well, become grumpy and more withdrawn. Cats in particular may spend more time sleeping.

Dental disease can occur in any animal at any age but as most disease is progressive it becomes more common and advanced in the older animal. Some of the symptoms of disease are often put down to 'old age' and therefore disease is often overlooked.

Outwardly visible severe pain is uncommon. Recently broken teeth and tooth root abscesses are usually excruciatingly painful and your pet will probably be noticeably off colour, possibly not eating and dribbling.

Tooth root infection sometimes leads to swelling and an area of discharging infection (yellow pus, sometimes blood tinged) on the side of the face or from the gums.

What other problems might you notice in your pets' mouth?

Discoloured teeth, worn teeth, missing teeth (if not previously extracted), extra teeth, and teeth not meeting properly (malocclusions) can all sometimes be associated with problems.

There are also other conditions that can occur within the mouth that are not dental disease but can mimic its symptoms. Included here is oral cancer. The oral cavity is the 4th most common location for cancer in both the dog and cat. Any animal that is seen to have a lump or ulceration in the mouth with or without other symptoms should be seen promptly. Early diagnosis can result in effective treatment in many cases.



Preventing Dental Disease

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

If you notice any of the symptoms and signs described your pet needs to see a vet. Treatment is almost always possible and can prevent significant discomfort and poor health.

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