

According to the American Veterinary Dental Society (AVDS), 80 percent of dogs and cats show oral disease by age 3, and it is the most common health problem treated in small animal health clinics today. The buildup of bacteria in your pet's mouth may cause more than just bad breath; according to research presented at a recent conference on Companion Animal Oral Health, bacteria are also the cause of oral disease and diseases in other organs of the body like the heart, liver and kidneys.

Just like humans, pet's teeth are prone to plaque buildup, and when allowed to combine with saliva and residual food between the tooth and gum, plaque turns to tartar. If your veterinarian does not remove plaque and tartar routinely, they may cause periodontal disease.

- Gingivitis is an inflammation of the gums most commonly caused by the accumulation of food particles in the crevices between the gums and the teeth. The main symptom is bleeding, although you may also notice redness, pain and difficulty chewing. If gingivitis is not treated, it may lead to periodontitis.
- Periodontitis is a serious infection that spreads to the tissues and bone in which the teeth are rooted causing loss of the teeth. Unfortunately, this disease is irreversible and may lead to other problems.
- Broken teeth are a common problem, most commonly caused by aggressive chewing on hard objects.

What to Look For

The most common signs of oral disease are:

- Yellow and brown tartar buildup
- Bleeding
- Bad breath
- Red inflamed gums
- Difficulty chewing
- Change in eating habits
- Pawing at the mouth

Veterinary Care

Fortunately, veterinary dental knowledge has grown exponentially in the last few years. Dental technology has also exploded, allowing your pet virtually all of the dental care that your pet receives, including dental implants, braces (to enable a comfortable bite), ultrasonic scaling controlled with microchips, root canals and bonding and brightening.

Veterinary care should include periodic dental exams, which are important in order to maintain good oral health. The frequency with which dental examinations should be performed depends on your pet's age.

- Puppies & kittens: The mouth should be examined by your veterinarian immediately upon acquiring your new pet and at every vaccination appointment up to four months of age. A dental exam should be performed again at six months of age. Baby teeth are

usually shed by the time your puppy or kitten is 6 months old. It is important to assess your pet's bite as well as his/her overall oral health. Bite abnormalities can sometimes be corrected by orthodontics before six months of age.

- One to three years: At this age, unless you notice problems or your veterinarian has developed a custom exam program due to special circumstances, dental exams should be done annually.
- Four to six years: If your pet has perfect teeth and you brush them daily, annual exams may suffice, but many dogs and cats in this age range require exams every six months. It is better to have more frequent examinations done and get a clean report card as opposed to finding potentially painful problems later. Toothaches are painful for animals, just like humans, but your pet won't be able to tell you that it hurts.
- Seven years and older: Dental examinations should be performed every six months when your pet is seven years of age or older. Advanced dental diseases are commonly diagnosed after 7 years of age; extractions and root canals are not uncommon in this age group.

The Dental Exam

- Your veterinarian can examine your pet's teeth in the exam room if your pet is cooperative and does not have severe dental problems.
- Full mouth X-rays are usually required because 70 percent of the tooth structure is beneath the gum line and thus is invisible to the naked eye.
- Your veterinarian may use a periodontal probe (a blunt probe that is used to check the gum/tooth interface) to search for gum pockets and other problems. He/she may use it sparingly in cooperative patients; however, a thorough exam may require sedation or anesthesia. He/she will examine all soft tissues.
- If anesthesia is required, many times the gas anesthetic agents are the same that you would have in the hospital

Home Care

Your pet needs preventive dental care just like you. AVDS recommends using a three-part dental care regimen to include:

- Routine physical exams by your veterinarian
- Regular dental care at home: Tooth brushing is the single most important part of oral care and cannot be over-emphasized. If your pet will allow it, you should brush their teeth daily. It is best to start early since most dogs and cats will allow brushing if you start when they are young. Use special toothpaste formulated for your pet; human toothpaste may upset your pet's stomach.
- Regular follow-up care: You can ask about specially formulated foods, such as pet foods that have been developed to enhance oral care by their abrasive action. Scientific studies have proven that these special diets are beneficial in maintaining oral health. There are also numerous chew products available that may be helpful. Use common sense and caution when choosing these products (ask your veterinarian for help). It is usually best to stay with softer products.

Recommended Products

- Hill's Prescription Diet t/d®
- Over the counter products such as Chew-Eez®
- various tooth brushes with a soft rating
- Prescription products and toothpastes