



Dental disease

Contributors: Vetstream Ltd



Dental disease

Dental disease is very common in cats and dogs. Surveys show that after the age of three years, about seven out of ten pets have some kind of tooth disorders. If left unattended these may cause irreversible damage to the dog's teeth, gums and jaw bones. Dental disease can be prevented by stopping the build up of plaque.

How do I know if my pet has tooth disease?

Plaque is a yellowish white deposit made up of bacteria and debris which forms around the surface of the teeth. In time it hardens to become yellowish brown tartar (sometimes called calculus) at the base of the tooth which gradually spreads until it may cover the whole of its surface. As well as the visible tartar there may be other indications of disease. Foul breath is very common and the pain resulting from advanced dental disease may cause difficulties in eating. If your dog dribbles excessively and sometimes this is flecked with blood or shows signs of pain and discomfort such as head shaking and pawing at its mouth it may have problems with its teeth.

How does dental disease affect my pet's health?

The tartar hidden below the gum line is the main cause of problems. It contains bacteria which will attack the surrounding gum tissue causing painful inflammation ('gingivitis') and infection can track down to the tooth roots. Pus may build up in the roots and form a painful abscess. This inflammation wears away tissue from the gum, bones and teeth and, as the disease becomes more advanced, the teeth will loosen and fall out. Bacteria and the poisons they produce can also get into the blood stream and cause damage throughout the body in organs such as the kidneys, heart and liver.

How can dental disease be treated?

If your pet has advanced disease and is in obvious pain, your veterinarian may need to take x-rays of your pet's head (under general anaesthetic) to see whether there are any deep abscesses. Any loose teeth will have to be removed because the disease is too advanced to be treated. Your veterinarian may prescribe antibiotics before doing dental work if there are signs of infection. Your vet will remove the tartar and clean the remaining teeth, usually with an ultrasonic scaling machine. Finally, your dog's teeth will be polished to leave a smooth surface which will slow down the build up of plaque in the future. However, it is inevitable that plaque will re-appear. To keep your dog's teeth in good condition it is likely that they will need regular scaling and polishing, in some cases at intervals of between six and twelve months.

Will a change in diet help control dental disease?

In the wild your pet's teeth would be much cleaner because its diet would contain harder materials than are found in commercially tinned or packaged foods. Cats and dogs naturally eat the bones, fur, etc of their prey which wear away the deposits of tartar. Replacing soft foods with dry or fibrous materials will slow the build up of plaque. The extra chewing involved helps control infection because it stimulates the production of saliva which has natural antibiotic properties. There are special diets available to help maintain clean teeth, please ask your veterinarian for further advice.

What else can I do to keep my pet's teeth clean?

Brushing your pet's teeth is just as important in preventing dental disease as brushing your own. Ideally your pet should get used to having its teeth cleaned from an early age. Wrapping a piece of soft gauze around your finger and gently rubbing the pet's teeth should get it used to the idea. You can then move on to using a toothbrush specially designed for dogs or a small ordinary toothbrush with soft bristles. Toothbrushes which fit over the end of your finger are available for cats and dogs. Your veterinarian can supply you with suitably flavoured toothpaste which your pet will enjoy. There are also some mouth washes and antibacterial gels that can help reduce plaque deposits and prevent infection. Do not attempt to use human toothpaste which will froth up in the mouth, your pet will not like the taste and it could do it serious harm.

What if my pet doesn't like having its teeth brushed?

At first your pet may resist but with gentleness, patience and persistence most pets can be trained to accept having their teeth cleaned. A regular brushing every day or at least three times a week will significantly reduce the risk of your pet suffering serious problems or needing frequent general anaesthetics to treat advanced dental disease.

Preventative healthcare for your pet is very important. Regular brushing of your pets' teeth from a young age can prevent the need for veterinary dental attention.

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