



DENTAL CARE

Dental health is a very important part of your pet's overall health, and dental problems can cause, or be caused by, other health problems. Your pet's teeth and gums should be checked at least once a year by your veterinarian to check for early signs of a problem and to keep your pet's mouth healthy.

Have your pet's teeth checked sooner if you observe any of the following problems:

- bad breath
- broken or loose teeth
- extra teeth or retained baby teeth
- teeth that are discolored or covered in tartar
- abnormal chewing, drooling, or dropping food from the mouth
- reduced appetite or refusal to eat
- pain in or around the mouth
- bleeding from the mouth
- swelling in the areas surrounding the mouth

Some pets become irritable when they have dental problems, and any changes in your pet's behavior should prompt a visit to your veterinarian. Always be careful when evaluating your pet's mouth, because a painful animal may bite.

Causes of pet dental problems

Although cavities are less common in pets than in people, pets can have many of the same dental problems that people can develop:

- broken teeth and roots
- periodontal disease
- abscesses or infected teeth
- cysts or tumors in the mouth
- malocclusion, or misalignment of the teeth and bite
- broken (fractured) jaw
- palate defects (such as cleft palate)

Periodontal disease is the most common dental condition in dogs and cats – by the time your pet is 3 years old, he or she will very likely have some early evidence of periodontal disease, which will worsen as your pet grows older if effective preventive measures aren't taken. Early detection and treatment are critical, because advanced periodontal disease can cause severe problems and pain for your pet. Periodontal disease doesn't just affect your pet's mouth. Other health problems found in association with periodontal disease include kidney, liver, and heart muscle changes.

It starts with plaque that hardens into tartar. Tartar above the gumline can often easily be seen and removed, but plaque and tartar below the gumline is damaging and sets the stage for infection and damage to the jawbone and the tissues that connect the tooth to the jaw bone. Periodontal disease is graded on a scale of 0 (normal) to 4 (severe).

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The treatment of periodontal disease involves a thorough dental cleaning and x-rays may be needed to determine the severity of the disease. Your veterinarian or a board-certified veterinary dentist will make recommendations based on your pet's overall health and the health of your pet's teeth, and provide you with options to consider.

Why does dentistry require anesthesia?

When you go to the dentist, you know that what's being done is meant to help you and keep your mouth healthy. Your dentist uses techniques to minimize pain and discomfort and can ask you how you are feeling, so you accept the procedures and do your best to keep still. Your pet does not understand the benefit of dental procedures, and he or she reacts by moving, trying to escape, or even biting.

Anesthesia makes it possible to perform the dental procedures with less stress and pain for your pet. In addition, anesthesia allows for a better cleaning because your pet is not moving around and risking injury from the dental equipment. If radiographs (x-rays) are needed, your pet needs to be very still in order to get good images, and this is unlikely without heavy sedation or anesthesia.

Although anesthesia will always have risks, it's safer now than ever and continues to improve so that the risks are very low and are far outweighed by the benefits. Most pets can go home the same day of the procedure, although they might seem a little groggy for the rest of the day.

What about "anesthesia-free" dental cleanings?

The American Veterinary Dental College does not recommend dental cleanings without anesthesia because they do not allow cleaning or inspection below the gumline, where most dental disease occurs, and can result in injury to the pet or the person performing the procedure.

What can I do at home for my pet's oral health?

Prevention of the most common oral disease in pets consists of frequent removal of the dental plaque and tartar that forms on teeth that are not kept clean. Regularly brushing your pet's teeth is the single most effective thing you can do to keep their teeth healthy between dental cleanings, and may reduce the frequency or even eliminate the need for periodic dental cleaning by your veterinarian. Daily brushing is best, but it's not always possible and brushing several times a week can be effective. Most dogs accept brushing, but cats can be a bit more resistant – patience and training are important.

There are many pet products marketed with claims that they improve dental health, but not all of them are effective. Talk with your veterinarian about any dental products, treats, or dental-specific diets you're considering for your pet, or ask your veterinarian for their recommendation.

DENTAL HOME CARE

So, when should you start home dental care? It is best to start as soon as possible, 8 to 12 weeks is best. At this age pets can become familiar with this routine. You can start brushing when the

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adult teeth start to come in as the mouth may become a bit sore at this time. Once the adult teeth have come in, you can pick up where you left off.

The first step is to work with your pet's mouth. Make it fun for both of you. Be patient and go slowly. Use lots of praise. Try to have your practice sessions at the same time each day so your pet gets into a routine. If your pet is highly motivated by food, try to use a special treat that is only used at this time.

Start by handling the muzzle and tickling the lips and then try rubbing the teeth and gums with your finger. Put a few drops of water, flavoured with garlic or tuna juice on your finger and soon your pet will look forward to this treat

Next, use a washcloth or piece of pantyhose, wrapped around the end of your finger and flavoured as above, to gently rub the teeth.

Finally, use a soft toothbrush to brush the teeth. There are several veterinary brushes available as well as pediatric brushes that can be used. Make it a game!

There are several products such as toothpastes, washes and gels available. These products may increase the effectiveness of your home-care program but remember, it's the brushing which does most of the cleaning. Brushing should be done daily for best results. Less than 4 times a week will have little if any effect. Human tooth paste is to be avoided as it will cause stomach upset if swallowed. Baking soda can be harmful, especially in older patients and hydrogen peroxide can be too harsh for the gums and must not be swallowed.

It helps to give mildly abrasive foods and toys. Visit www.vohc.org for products with valid research to back their claims. Focus on products that are shown to control plaque. Avoid natural bones, antlers, dried cow hooves and hard nylon toys as these are hard enough to fracture teeth. If you would not want to be hit in the knee with it, don't let your dog chew on it!

A consistent program of home-care will greatly improve your pet's dental health. This will mean fewer professional cleanings, less tooth loss and a happier, healthier pet.