

DENTAL HYGIENE AND YOUR PET

By Brooke Crosier, DVM

Dental disease is extremely common in dogs and cats. Your veterinarian will take a close look at your pet's mouth during its annual exam, and may recommend further treatment to address dental disease.

PLAQUE/TARTAR:

Plaque is the slimy substance that builds up on your pet's teeth after eating. As time goes by the plaque may harden, or calcify, into tartar, also known as calculi. Once dental disease advances to this stage it is very difficult to remove without a dental cleaning. At the plaque stage it is possible to still clean the teeth with such measures as brushing and vet-approved dental treats.

GINGIVITIS:

Gingivitis is inflammation of the gum tissue that usually occurs secondary to plaque or tartar formation. This inflammation can be painful and sometimes smelly.

BROKEN TEETH:

Broken teeth are another fairly common finding, and pets often show no sign of discomfort when this occurs. Chewing on hard materials such as rocks, antlers, or bones can cause teeth to fracture. If only the most superficial layer (enamel) is exposed we may just recommend monitoring the tooth. If the fracture is deeper, the pulp cavity may be exposed. This contains the nerve and blood supply of the tooth, and can serve as a channel for bacteria to enter the tooth root. This creates a tooth abscess, which is painful and necessitates tooth extraction.

DENTAL CLEANING/PROPHYLAXIS:

If dental disease is severe enough, your vet may recommend a dental. A pet has to be under anesthesia to have this performed. While asleep we scale and polish each tooth individually. Often radiographs (x-rays) are performed of all the teeth. We use these tools to determine what teeth, if any, may need extraction. If a tooth is loose, infected, or has a lot of bone loss around the root, it is in the pet's best interest to remove the tooth. We perform our cleanings and extractions with highly specialized equipment, similar to what would be used in a human dentist's office. Once the mouth heals most pets are able to resume their normal diet (including kibble) with no trouble at all, and are usually much more comfortable, as well!

PREVENTION:

Brushing your pet's teeth is the best way to address dental disease in its early stages. To be effective it should be done at least 3-4 times per week. You can purchase a dental kit from most pet supply stores, or online. They usually include some sort of brush (either a finger brush, or a smaller version of a human toothbrush) and toothpaste that is safe for your pet to ingest. Do not use human toothpaste, as this is **toxic** to pets! It is best to slowly acclimate your pet to toothbrushing. Start by brushing just a couple of teeth, and give your pet a strong reward after to show he is doing a good job, and brushing his teeth is nothing to be afraid of!

You can also get other products over-the-counter that may be effective for dental disease. You can check out the website www.vohc.org for a list of veterinary-approved dental products. These include treats, food, and mouth rinses.

Dry food can also help slow progression of dental disease, and is recommended as the primary diet for most pets, unless they have urinary or kidney issues. Avoid very hard treats/toys that may fracture teeth.

Please do not hesitate to talk to your veterinarian with any questions!