

DENTAL DISEASE IN PETS

Dogs and cats suffer from dental disease like humans do. By the age of 3 years, most pets will have dental disease unless owners are practicing preventive dentistry. The most common dental disease is periodontal disease, which lies hidden beneath the gums around the teeth. This causes pain, foul smelling breath (halitosis), and eventually, loss of teeth. It is the most common dental condition veterinarians treat. Accumulation of plaque and calculus on the visible part of the tooth is a sign that subgingival calculus and periodontal disease are present. Periodontal disease means infection and leads to erosion of the periodontal ligament and bone structures around the tooth.

In humans as well as in pets, a critical connection between periodontal disease and diseases of the heart, kidneys, liver and other organs has been shown. The same bacteria found in periodontal disease have been found in these organs, probably carried there in the blood. In addition to contributing to disease in other organs, periodontal disease in pets causes pain, difficulty eating, halitosis and finally, tooth loss. These signs may not be readily apparent to owners as animals may conceal pain and other signs may not be noticed. Other dental diseases present in pets include tooth root abscesses, retained baby teeth, malalignment, abnormal wear of the teeth, and fractured teeth. Cavities may occur as well.

A contributing factor to periodontal disease is the accumulation of plaque (sticky film of bacteria on the teeth), which, calcified, becomes a hard crust on the teeth called calculus or tartar. You can see this on the teeth, starting at the gum line and traveling down the tooth over time. It may become so thick it overgrows the gums. The gums may be red, swollen and bleeding and the teeth may be loose by the time owners notice the problem.

Your veterinarian can evaluate the overall and dental health of your pet, perform dental x-rays for a thorough oral exam, make diagnoses and treat existing conditions. A thorough oral exam should be performed at least annually to detect problems early when treatment is less extensive and most effective. Senior pets require more frequent exams and treatment.

Prevention of dental disease is crucial to the health of your pet. This starts with your pet's annual wellness visit to your veterinarian. Every year, and twice a year if your dog or cat is 7 years or older, your pet should be examined by a veterinarian and have a complete blood count, blood chemistry, heartworm test, intestinal parasite detection test, a urinalysis and a thorough oral exam; this is often where dental disease is first diagnosed. Part of the dental exam should include a new test called OraStrip that can be used right during your visit to determine the severity of periodontal disease. This test is more accurate than a visual exam alone, but should be used in conjunction with the oral exam. Owners can see the result of the test right then and there.

If your veterinarian finds broken teeth, red, swollen or bleeding gums, loose teeth, a foul odor, gingival masses, oral masses, and calculus on the teeth, a dental diagnostic and therapeutic procedure should be performed. This requires anesthesia. Owners should be careful not to be conned into the myth that anesthetic dental procedures are dangerous and to fall for teeth cleaning at grooming places and pet store personnel. These procedures are done illegally by unlicensed and untrained people, who can do more harm than good to your pet. Just ask yourself, would you let your hairdresser do your dental work? Anesthesia allows the veterinarian to do a thorough exam, explore around the teeth for periodontal pockets, and perform dental x-rays to find disease not visible above the gum line. Pets can benefit from every dental procedure available to humans, including implants, orthodontia, root canals, crowns, and cavity restorations. A careful chosen anesthetic protocol and vigilant monitoring of the patient during anesthesia and recovery make this a very safe procedure.

Your veterinarian will counsel you on preventive dental home care. Just like for humans, tooth brushing at home is the mainstay of home care for dogs and cats. Ask to receive information about toothpaste, tooth brushes, oral rinses, and dietary products that can help you maintain oral health in your pet. Home care can't replace dental care by your veterinarian when needed, but it can lengthen the intervals between procedures. Good oral health will greatly extend the life span as well as the quality of life of your pet.