

## Dental Disease

**Why is dental care important?** For the same reason as it is important to care for your own teeth! The most common disease in pets is periodontal disease, that is, disease affecting the supporting structures of the teeth. It is highly genetically controlled, so some breeds have more problems and earlier than others.

It is important to realize that your pet's dental health lies primarily in your hands. With your own teeth, your dentist and hygienist do a small but critical part of your oral hygiene, but you have to do the daily brushing and flossing that are required to slow the progression of periodontal disease. This disease affects 90% of dogs and 70% of cats over 5 years of age.

Periodontal disease is the result of bacterial infection, and as it progresses, the structures supporting the teeth weaken, leading to loose and lost teeth. The infection also affects your pet in other ways, by showering bacteria into the blood to travel to organs like the heart and kidneys, or to the joints, and cause or exacerbate any disease there. That is to say, ultimately an infected mouth can shorten your pet's quantity and quality of life, and needs to be assessed and treated just like any other infection in the body.

What you are most likely to notice as an owner is a foul smell from the mouth, and brown tartar on the teeth. The smell is a sign that all is not well, and the tartar is dental plaque that has become mineralized. Plaque is essentially like a slime blanket of food, saliva and bacteria and other germs that coats the teeth, and fills the pocket between the tooth and the gum. This is the disease-causing culprit.

It is important to have your veterinarian perform regular oral health examinations, in order to assess whether there is any dental disease that needs to be treated. If the gums are diseased, or there are broken or infected teeth, it is critical to have the teeth x-rayed, assessed and cleaned before you try home care, because your pet's mouth may be too sore for brushing, and you can damage the inflamed tissues. Only an x-ray can tell us what lies below the gumline, and even if the teeth and gums appear normal, there is often a lot of disease underneath. Research has shown that pets feel pain from these problem areas in an equivalent way to us.

Although it would be nice if Fido would sit and hold his mouth open for an exam and cleaning, the reality is that the only way to properly assess your pet's mouth is under general anesthetic. Fortunately the anaesthetics we use today are extremely safe, and pose less of a risk to your pet than does neglecting their dental health.

Once the teeth are clean and healthy a home care program, ideally involving brushing at least 4 times weekly, will help to keep your pet's teeth healthy until it's time for their next assessment. If brushing is not an option, there are many different types of dental chews, gels, and foods that will help also.