

What is Dental Disease?

Dental disease, or periodontal disease is caused by an infection called plaque. Plaque is made up of food particles, saliva and bacteria. It sticks to the tooth surface and if not removed will calcify into tartar (or calculus).

This takes place above and below the gum line and over time can lead to the destruction of the supportive tissues and jawbone, resulting in bad breath and eventual loss of teeth.

How do I know if my pet has dental disease?

More than 85% of dogs and cats over four years old have some form of periodontal disease. There are various signs you can look out for such as:

- Bad Breath
- Discoloured teeth
- Loose teeth
- Excessive drooling, sometimes blood stained inflamed gums.
- Dropping of food from the mouth when eating, or reluctant to chew or eat at all, especially hard food.
- Pain when handled around the head
- Facial swelling
- Behavioural changes (e.g. lethargy, increased aggression)
- Pawing at the mouth
- Receding gums

How do I prevent dental disease?

For adult cats and dogs with existing dental disease, a dental treatment with a scale and polish under general anaesthetic is often necessary to get their mouth back into top condition. This will allow us to start prevention with a clean mouth and hoping to prevent, or slow down dental disease developing again in the future.

Here are some tips on how to prevent your pet from getting dental disease:

Brushing your pets teeth

Brushing your pet's teeth daily can help control plaque build up and prevent periodontal disease.

Select a toothbrush

Choose a soft toothbrush only

Toddler brushes are great for small dogs and cats

Dog and Cat toothbrushes are available at the clinic

Electric toothbrushes are easy to use and more efficient. Your pet may be frightened by the noise and will need to be trained to accept this

Make sure you label your pet's toothbrush and keep it separate from the family toothbrushes!

Select a toothpaste

Do not use human toothpaste when brushing your pet's teeth as your pet may swallow it. Human toothpaste is not designed to be swallowed and has ingredients that can upset your pet's stomach.

Pet toothpaste is chicken or beef flavoured which may help your pet accept it. Pet toothpaste is also safe if it is swallowed. Sometimes our pets will like the toothpaste too

much!! In this case we may suggest dipping the toothbrush in an oral rinse instead.

Introduce your pet to teeth brushing

Cats and small dogs may feel more comfortable if they can sit on their owners lap while having their teeth brushed.

Begin slowly, initial sessions should be brief, a minute or two and well rewarded.

Get your pet used to the toothbrush by dipping it in tuna juice, chicken or beef stock or just use water.

Next try offering the toothbrush with the paste, without brushing. Allow your pet to taste the paste.

When your pet is comfortable with the brush try brushing one or two strokes on a few teeth. Slowly increase the brushing as your pet becomes more comfortable

Start at the front of the mouth. Pets are often more accepting of this.

5 Steps to effective teeth brushing

- **Add toothpaste** - apply a small amount of pet toothpaste to the brush (do not use human toothpaste).
- **Correct angle** - hold brush 45 degree angle to gum line.
- **Circular motion** - apply the toothbrush and use a circular motion with gentle pressure on the teeth and gum line.
- **At least 30-60 seconds** - brush for at least 30-60 seconds on each side of the mouth, remembering the back teeth. You do not need to clean the inside surfaces of the teeth
- **Reward** - reward your pet for their good behaviour

Alternatives to teeth brushing

Treats and chews

Large hard products such as pig's ears, noses or trotters, rawhide bones and Dentabones encourage your pets to chew. The chewing action aids in the removal of plaque via physical rubbing and the spread of protective saliva. These should not be relied on solely for dental prevention, as they are not as effective as raw bones, but could be fed once a week instead of raw bones for a change.

Dental Diets

Many premium dry pet foods and special dental treats are available for both cats and dogs and are specially designed to keep pets teeth cleaned while still providing them with a complete balanced diet. Many of these suppliers offer a 100% money back guarantee if your pet does not like them.

If your pet hasn't started these specially designed foods at an early age, it is best to start them after their teeth have been professionally scaled and polished. These foods contain enzymes and ingredients similar to those found in our toothpaste which help to slow the dental disease process and help prevent plaque from forming on the teeth.

Oral and Dental Treatments

For pets with severe or persistent dental and gum disease or bad breath, using a rinse or gel available from your veterinary clinic may be advisable. Gum protectant applications may also be prescribed for pets with problem gums.

Dental Toys

There are some toys available which are again great at encouraging your dog to chew. Some of these toys include the Kong (conventional Kong pictured) and Gumabone.

Toys are a useful addition to a dental hygiene program, however they should not be relied on solely.

Veterinary Dental Treatments

In the majority of pet's lives, there comes a time when their teeth may require veterinary treatment over and above their regular examinations. This treatment involves a general anaesthetic and a full dental examination, including charting and scaling, both ultrasonically and by hand, and then finishing with a polish. A very similar procedure used by your own dentist. For more information see our handout 'Looking after your pet's teeth and gums'

What should I do if I suspect my pet has dental disease?

If you think your pet is showing any signs of dental disease it is important that treatment is started immediately before any irreversible damage occurs. At this point it is important to contact vet healthcare team members immediately to make an appointment with your veterinarian for a dental check-up.

Depending on the condition of your pet's teeth and gums, they will clean them to remove scale and infection, polish to further remove plaque, and flush to eliminate bacteria. It may also be necessary to remove teeth that are fractured or loose. These procedures will be conducted under a general anaesthetic and in certain cases will be followed by treatment with antibiotics to prevent infection of irritated gums.

Just like your own dentist vets use specialized dentistry instruments including ultrasonic and hand scaling equipment throughout this procedure.