

## Dental Care for Your Pet

People are supposed to visit their dentist regularly to help keep their teeth and gums clean and healthy. But did you know that your pet needs regular dental care, too? Studies have shown that 80% of dogs and 70% of cats already have periodontal (gum) disease by the time they are 3 years old.

Periodontal disease in dogs and cats can be painful, leads to tooth loss, and can contribute to other health problems, so it's important to take steps to prevent it as much as possible.



### What Is Periodontal Disease?

Periodontal disease starts when plaque (a bacterial film) coats the tooth. Plaque hardens (calcifies) into tartar, a thick yellow or brown layer on the teeth. Tartar can irritate the gums, creating an environment where bacteria thrive. As the disease progresses, the gums become tender, red and swollen. Eventually, the inflamed gums pull away from the teeth, creating pockets that trap more bacteria and food particles. The gums bleed, the roots of the teeth may become exposed, teeth may become loose, and your pet may feel pain. If the bacteria enter the bloodstream, they can create problems for organs such as the heart, lungs, liver and kidneys. Bad breath in pets may be a sign of periodontal disease. However, your pet may not let you know if he or she is in any pain. Animals try to hide pain, and unless they feel very ill, they usually continue to eat.

#### Signs of Dental Problems

- Bad breath
- Sensitivity around the mouth
- Loss of appetite
- Yellow or brown deposits on the teeth
- Bleeding, inflamed and withdrawn gums
- Loose or missing teeth
- Pawing at the mouth or face
- Difficulty chewing

### What We Can Do for Your Pet's Teeth

Fortunately, there are several ways you can care for your pet's teeth. One is simply to bring your pet in for his or her regular checkups. As part of the examination, we take a quick look at your pet's teeth to look for plaque and tartar. Based on what we see, we may recommend a tooth cleaning for your pet. Dental cleanings are performed with the pet under general anesthesia, so we will also want to do some basic blood tests to see whether anesthesia is right for your pet. If your pet has severe dental disease, the best treatment may include tooth extraction. We prescribe pain medication for your pet after dental procedures to make sure he or she is comfortable. Don't wait for a regular checkup if you suspect a problem! The earlier we catch periodontal disease, the easier it is to treat.

### What You Can Do for Your Pet's Teeth

Believe it or not, the best way you can help protect your pet's teeth is the same way you protect your own: brushing. Pets are never too young to start having their teeth brushed at home; in fact, the younger they are, the better. Slowly and gently introduce your pet to toothbrushing. It should be a bonding experience that is reinforced with praise and rewards. Begin by rubbing your pet's teeth and gums with

soft gauze wrapped around your finger. Gradually switch to using a specially designed pet toothbrush or baby toothbrush with pet toothpaste (do not use toothpaste for people because it is not safe to swallow). If your pet is most at ease on your lap, keep his or her toothbrush next to the chair where you sit together. Focus on your pet's gum line, and work up to 30 seconds of brushing for each side of the mouth at least a few times a week. If your pet won't tolerate brushing, your veterinarian can recommend plaque-preventive products for your pet.

There's no substitute for regular brushing, but feeding dry food can help keep your pet's teeth and gums in good condition. In addition, special plaque-reducing foods, treats, and toys can help. The Seal of Acceptance from the Veterinary Oral Health Council appears on products that meet defined standards for plaque and tartar control in dogs and cats. Ask your veterinarian for recommendations.

Caring for your pet's teeth can have several benefits. For example, a few minutes of brushing each week can help give your pet a happier, healthier life.

#### Ways to Prevent Periodontal Disease in Your Pet

- Bring your pet in for regular checkups
- Brush your pet's teeth or use plaque-reducing products at least a few times per week
- Feed dry food
- Provide plaque-reducing foods, treats and toys