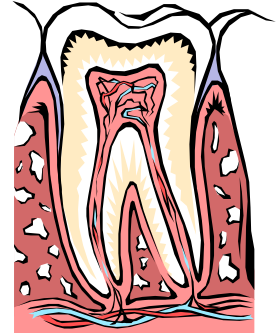




# WHY SHOULD I TAKE CARE OF MY PETS' TEETH?

Your pets' oral hygiene is not just a cosmetic issue. A good yearly physical exam of your pet's mouth is important for several reasons. Tooth and gingival (gum) disease in dogs and cats leads to unnecessary infection and pain. There have also been studies that suggest an association between dental disease and heart and kidney disease. We can often times catch oral cancers before they have spread to other body parts. Therefore, our focus is to both prevent and treat dental disease before it becomes contributory to the pet's declining health.

Normal dentition: The crown of the tooth is the white part of the tooth. The root is the part of the tooth that extends below the gum line. The first layer of protection to the crown is the enamel which also gives the crown its shine. The first layer of protection to the root is the cementum, and under this is the dentin. The pulp cavity is the connective tissue within the roots and part of the crown, which contains nerves as well as blood vessels which nourish the tooth. The neck of the tooth is the junction between the crown and the root, and is also where the gingival attaches. The periodontal ligament attaches the root to the bone (alveolus).



Deciduous (baby) teeth arrive between 3-6 weeks of age, and permanent teeth between the ages of 2-7 months in a dog and 4-7 months in a cat. The front teeth (incisors) erupt first and the molars and canines last. Dogs have 42 teeth and cats have 30.

There are several developmental abnormalities of the oral cavity which may occur during a puppy or kitten's growth. For example, sometimes baby teeth do not erupt. This leads to malalignment of adult teeth or teeth that never erupt later in life, which can lead to overcrowding of teeth, and increased plaque accumulation. Another problem is called enamel hypoplasia which is where the enamel fails to form normally over the crown leading to a brown stain of the tooth and soft teeth which are prone to damage. Some medications can also cause tooth problems.

Often times, some of these abnormalities can be detected during your pet's early exams, and attempts can be made to give your pet the best dentition possible. This is called interceptive dentistry. For example, if a puppy presents with a severely smaller lower jaw, removing the incisor teeth (smaller front teeth) of the jaw will give the jaw a 20% chance of catching up in its growth to the upper jaw. Also, removal of baby teeth that fail to come out, or even baby teeth that didn't erupt through the gum prior to 6 months of age may allow adult teeth to come in normally.

Signs of dental pain include: rubbing their face on the floor or pawing at their mouth, blood tinged saliva, salivating, depression, anorexia and weight loss, chattering of the teeth, and aggression or grumpiness. Often times calculus can be seen on the teeth. Eating is an instinctual behavior. Although sometimes pets with dental disease show lack of interest in food (or will only eat wet food), by the time we see inappetance, dental disease may be very advanced.

As dogs and cats age, they develop tartar build-up on their teeth and due to normal wear and tear, they develop dental abnormalities, but plaque build-up is not necessarily related to an animal's age.

Genetics also plays an important role in when or if an animal will succumb to dental disease. Some cats, for example, are prone to feline resorptive lesions. These are lesions, noted at the neck of the tooth, often invade the enamel, dentin, and/or cementum. They are common and painful lesions which may or may not be accompanied by calculus on the tooth. These lesions may not be visible unless radiographs are taken because they often occur under the gum line.



Prior to these painful signs from your pet, periodontal disease can be confirmed during a physical exam, and or radiographs. The cornerstone of treatment revolves around removal of calculus at the gingival and under the gum line with dental instruments and while under anesthesia. Teeth and the entire oral cavity is first examined. Then the ultrasonic scaler is used to clean tartar. The areas with rough areas are hand scaled. Teeth are polished, and a fluoride treatment is applied to the teeth. Teeth which have obvious irreversible lesions are extracted. With invasive dentistry, or if an animal has a known underlying problem such as heart, kidney or an immunosuppressing disease, antibiotics may be administered.

Other procedures such as filing cavities, root canals and crown replacements are requested and are done in order to prevent extraction of the tooth.

There are several prophylactic measures that an owner can do to reduce tartar build-up or prevent tooth damage. Regular tooth brushing with a non-fluoride pet toothpaste can help to minimize tartar, on the crown and at the gum margin. Also, special dental diets, treats and chews have been shown to prevent tartar accumulation. In animals already on a prescription diet, or those with food allergies, there are several oral rinses available.

Sometimes anxiety plays a part in dental disease. For example, an anxious cat who tends to over-groom, can create painful ulcers on its gingiva. Dogs with crate anxiety, can chew at the crate causing fractured or worn teeth which may warrant extractions. If your pet suffers from anxiety, talk to your veterinarian about treatment protocols. Dogs who chronically chew tennis balls, rocks or other hard surfaces, and Frisbee catchers all may also elicit signs of tooth damage.

When an animal is eliciting signs of periodontal disease, your veterinarian will recommend a dental cleaning under anesthesia. Chipping tartar off of your pet's teeth will allow one to visualize the thickness of calculus, but is not dental therapy and provides no benefit to the patient since the cause of periodontal disease is plaque (invisible bacterial slime) below the gum line. During this time, blood work should first be checked to make sure that your pet is a good candidate for anesthesia. If your pet's heart, lungs and general body condition is in good health, your pet is anesthetized, and all the teeth are cleaned and polished. Teeth which have obvious abnormal structural lesions, or which are surrounded by gingiva that appears severely inflamed are radiographed so that roots can be visualized. Damaged teeth or teeth which have damaged roots are extracted, and pets are kept comfortable on pain medication. Regular dental exams and treatment will keep your pet healthy and happy!

