

Oral health in dogs and cats

Your pet's teeth should be checked at least once a year by your veterinarian for early signs of a problem and to keep your pet's mouth healthy.

Have your pet's teeth checked sooner if you observe any of the following problems:

- bad breath
- broken or loose teeth
- extra teeth or retained baby teeth
- teeth that are discolored or covered in tartar
- abnormal chewing, drooling, or dropping food from the mouth
- reduced appetite or refusal to eat
- pain in or around the mouth
- bleeding from the mouth
- swelling in the areas surrounding the mouth

Some pets become irritable when they have dental problems, and any changes in your pet's behavior should prompt a visit to your veterinarian. Always be careful when evaluating your pet's mouth, because a painful animal may bite.

Causes of pet dental problems

Although cavities are less common in pets than in people, they can have many of the same dental problems that people can develop:

- broken teeth and roots
- periodontal disease
- abscesses or infected teeth
- cysts or tumors in the mouth
- malocclusion, or misalignment of the teeth and bite
- broken (fractured) jaw
- palate defects (such as cleft palate)

Periodontal disease is the most common dental condition in dogs and cats – by the time your pet is 3 years old, he or she will very likely have some early evidence of periodontal disease, which will worsen as your pet grows older if effective preventive measures aren't taken. Early detection and treatment are critical, because advanced periodontal disease can cause severe problems and pain for your pet. Periodontal disease doesn't just affect your pet's mouth. Other health problems found in association with periodontal disease include kidney, liver, and heart muscle changes.

It starts with plaque that hardens into tartar. Tartar above the gumline can often easily be seen and removed, but plaque and tartar below the gumline is damaging and sets the stage for infection and damage to the jawbone and the tissues that connect the tooth to the jaw bone. Periodontal disease is graded on a scale of 0 (normal) to 4 (severe).

The treatment of periodontal disease involves a thorough dental cleaning and x-rays may be needed to determine the severity of the disease. Your veterinarian or a board-certified veterinary dentist will make recommendations based on your pet's overall health and the health of your pet's teeth, and provide you with options to consider.

Prevention of the most common oral disease in pets consists of frequent removal of the dental plaque and tartar that forms on teeth that are not kept clean. Regularly brushing your pet's teeth is the single most effective thing you can do to keep their teeth healthy between dental cleanings, and may reduce the frequency or even eliminate the need for periodic dental cleaning by your veterinarian. Daily brushing is best, but it's not always possible and brushing several times a week can be effective.

Source: avma.org (American Veterinary Medicine Association)