

Caring for your pet's teeth and gums



Dental disease is a common health problem in dogs and cats. It can lead to bad breath; swollen, bleeding gums; loose teeth; difficulty eating; and even more severe problems. But you can easily avoid these problems by regularly visiting your veterinarian for professional exams and cleanings and by caring for your pet's teeth at home.

What causes dental disease?

A thin film of protein from saliva, food particles, and dead cells forms on your pet's teeth and gums. If this layer is allowed to thicken, it becomes a perfect environment for bacteria. Bacterial plaque buildup along the gum line can lead to gingivitis, or inflamed gums, and infection. Gingivitis can lead to periodontitis, an inflammation of the deeper tissues surrounding the teeth. In severe cases, periodontitis may be associated with the spread of infection to other parts of the body, including the heart and kidneys.

What your veterinarian can do to prevent dental disease

At your pet's dental appointment, your veterinarian will first examine its mouth and teeth for problems such as plaque, calculus, or gingivitis; broken or missing teeth; discolored teeth; masses; or obvious periodontal disease. Then your veterinarian will anesthetize your pet to examine its mouth more thoroughly and to clean its teeth. The in-depth exam may reveal that your pet needs treatment such as tooth extraction or special therapy for advanced gum disease. Dental X-rays may also be needed to find problems that can't be seen by visual examination. Finally, after examining and cleaning your pet's teeth, your veterinarian will polish them and may apply fluoride.

Brushing your pet's teeth at home

Brushing your pet's teeth can go a long way toward preventing dental disease. Some pets resist brushing, but most eventually accept it, especially if you start a brushing routine when your pet is young (10 weeks to 10 months). Aim at brushing your pet's teeth once a day or at least twice a week.

Step 1: Choose a pet toothpaste your pet likes. (Don't use human toothpaste or toothbrushes on your pet.

Human toothpaste may be toxic in pets if ingested, and human toothbrushes are too big for a pet's mouth.) Several brands and flavors are available to help coax your pet into a brushing regimen. Place a small amount of flavored pet toothpaste on your finger, and offer it to your pet daily for several days as a reward or treat. This will condition your pet to view brushing as fun and rewarding. Once your pet accepts toothpaste as a reward, use your index finger to simulate the brushing motion of a toothbrush, while praising the pet and giving the daily dose of flavored toothpaste.

Step 2: In five to seven days, introduce a soft-bristled pet toothbrush. You can apply a small bit of the flavored toothpaste at the beginning and end of brushing to reinforce the conditioned behavior. The brushing technique for dogs and cats is similar to that for people. Position the bristles at a 45-degree angle to the tooth. Make small circular strokes at the gum line while rotating the bristles outward to remove debris. Start at the back teeth and work forward and around to the other side. Eight to 10 strokes are usually sufficient for a given area. To brush the inner surfaces of the teeth, try inserting a toy into the front of the pet's mouth to hold it open while you brush.

Other ways to prevent dental disease

Toys, treats, rawhide chews, and specially formulated foods are available to help keep your pet's teeth clean, but use these in addition to brushing your pet's teeth. Most of these toys and foods have a mild abrasive action to help wipe away the thin layer of protein that builds up on teeth. Others are treated with enzymes to help reduce bacteria. Your veterinarian may also recommend gels, sprays, rinses, or special treats or foods that chemically retard plaque. When buying treats or foods, look for the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) seal of approval. For a list of approved products, visit www.vohc.org.

Follow-up exams are important to monitor home care and signs of dental disease. Keep in mind that if home dental care is not provided, then professional cleanings may be needed more often. And if your pet is having difficulty accepting home care, contact your veterinarian so you can work together to find an agreeable solution. Remember, by taking care of your pet's teeth and gums, you're helping care for its overall health. ■