

Oral Health in Cats and Dogs
Kemba L. Marshal, DVM, DABVP Avian Practice
Director, Veterinary Services

Does your dog or cat have breath that makes you take a step back? Do you notice your dog or cat has discolored or loose teeth? Is your pet having a hard time chewing food? Your pet may have periodontal (gum) disease. Dental disease occurs so frequently that it is one of the most common disease occurring in pet dogs and cats. What exactly is periodontal disease though and what can you do about it? Continue reading to find out.

Both gum and dental disease are the result of the normal bacteria in our pet's mouths. At its onset, periodontal disease begins when bacteria form a sticky substance (plaque) to allow the buildup of bacteria. Saliva is produced constantly in the mouth and increases when eating a meal or a treat. Pets (and people) increase saliva production to soften the food and start the process of chemical breakdown. Saliva contains, among other things, minerals which adhere to the bacteria rich plaque to form tartar (dental calculus). Food and bacteria trapped under the gum line are a perfect environment for rapid bacterial growth. Because plaque and tartar beneath the gum line provide oral bacteria a dark, warm moist environment and meals/treats/snacks provide a constant food source, severe bacterial buildup can occur.

Bacterial overgrowth triggers an immune response by your pet where large numbers of white blood cells move in to attempt to destroy the bacteria. At the same time, bacterial toxins (a defense mechanism of the bacteria) are secreted and contribute to a cycle of gum insult. This irritation destroys the integrity of the soft tissue of the gums and allows for increasing and deepening bacterial proliferation and penetration of the gums. Once bacteria breach the gum line, tooth root damage can occur and bacteria can enter the central blood supply of individual teeth. There is only one blood supply in the body so once the tooth root has been accessed by bacteria, bacteria can access major organs like the heart and the kidneys. For this reason, organ disease like heart and kidney disease can be associated with severe dental disease.

Here is the good news, veterinary dentistry services are offered at nearly all veterinary clinics. In addition to a physical and oral exam, dental radiographs may be indicated to assess the health of tooth roots. Blood work (a complete blood count and serum chemistry panel) will be required to help evaluate your pet's overall health. Effective dental cleanings are done under general anesthesia to maximize your pets comfort, facilitate cleaning effectiveness as your pet lies still and allow a thorough oral exam of all tooth surfaces during the cleaning process. When dental cleanings are done routinely, before severe dental disease occurs, they are called prophylactics or prophys. Periodontal disease may have to be treated in steps with the first step being oral antibiotic administration to decrease the amount of bacteria and gum inflammation present. There are veterinary dental specialists boarded through the American Veterinary Dental College (www.avdc.org) available for advanced dental disease treatment and management.

It is important to have discussions on your cat or dog's oral health during each veterinary visit. Your veterinarian can advise you on feeding options to help reduce tartar or plaque buildup. Products with the Veterinary Oral Health Council (www.vohc.org) seal are supported by research demonstrating efficacy.

REFERENCES

<https://www.avdc.org/periodontaldisease.html>

<http://www.vohc.org/>