

# Dental Disease in Dogs and Cats

Dental disease is one of the most common problems in dogs and cats, but it often goes undetected. When was the last time you looked in your pet's mouth?

The problem is **plaque**, the layer of bacteria and food particles that forms on the teeth. **Tartar** develops when this calcifies and hardens. Plaque causes **gingivitis** – infection of the gums. Left untreated, it leads to **periodontitis**, where the infection gets into the tooth roots and damages the ligaments and bones that support the teeth. Eventually tooth loss occurs. Bacteria can also enter the bloodstream and cause other problems including heart and kidney disease.

## What are the signs of tooth and gum disease?

- Yellow or brown stains on the teeth (tartar)
- Redness of the gums (gingivitis), especially at the tooth/gum margins.
- Dribbling and/or bad breath!
- Sometimes painful gums or loose teeth.
- Reluctance to eat or difficulty eating.

## What can you do to prevent this?

Fortunately, this common disease is usually preventable. There are lots of things that you can do to make sure that your pet maintains healthy teeth and gums.

Plaque can be controlled by either mechanical or chemical means. Mechanical methods physically clean the teeth by brushing or rubbing. Chemical products help to control plaque, usually by killing the bacteria or binding salivary calcium. No one product will be the answer for every pet, but we can help you select the product(s) that are best for you and your pet's needs.

## Check your pet's teeth regularly (including back teeth)

- Normal healthy teeth should be clean and white, and the gums should be uniformly pink all the way to the tooth margins.
- A yellow discolouration of the teeth is an indication of tartar build-up and should **not** be ignored for too long.
- Redness of the gums, a thick build-up of tartar on the teeth, or bad breath all indicate more advanced disease and mean that it's time to see the vet – as soon as possible.

## Have your vet check the teeth at least once a year

We will do this as part of your pet's annual health check and vaccination. In some cases a surgical scale and polish under general anaesthesia will be recommended prior to introducing preventative dental hygiene. The reverse side of this information sheet details some of the *Veterinary Dental Procedures* available.

## Preventive Home Dental Care

Dental disease affects 85% of all dogs and cats over three years of age. But it doesn't have to be that way!

## Brush Your Pet's Teeth Every Day

This is the gold standard in pet dental hygiene reducing up to 100% of plaque when performed effectively.

**Effective tooth brushing** is very much dependent on a cooperative pet and a patient owner! Human toothpastes are unsuitable for pets, due to their taste, foaming action and high fluoride content. They are not meant to be swallowed and pets have not mastered the 'rinse and spit method'. We have **toothpastes** designed specifically for animals that come in a variety of flavours that most pets will accept. We also have **finger brushes** (thimble-like brushes) that are much easier to control inside the mouth of cats and small dogs than a regular tooth brush.



Small toothbrushes with very soft bristles like a baby toothbrush are suitable for larger dogs. To get your pet used to brushing, it is wise to start with just your finger, perhaps flavoured with beef stock (dogs) or tuna (cats) before trying a bit of toothpaste, and then finally progressing to using a brush. You only need to brush the outside of each tooth as the tongue adequately cleans the inside. Be patient – it can sometimes take weeks or even months before your pet will let you clean their whole mouth in one sitting.

Refer to handout *Guide to Brushing your Pet's Teeth* for tips to improve the acceptance of a toothbrush by your pet.

## Royal Canin Dental Diet

Diet is an important part of dental care. Many people think that any dry food will clean their pet's teeth. It won't.

Regular dry foods shatter on penetration and clean only the tip of the teeth, not right up to the gum line where the problem lies (much like a person biting into a brittle cracker). There's nothing wrong with feeding your pet good quality dry commercial pet food, in fact we advise this for all of our patients, but it won't clean their teeth.



*Royal Canin Dental* diet is different. Mechanically – the physical structure of the kibble means that your pet must really chew/bite each biscuit for it to break down (much like a person biting into an apple). It also works chemically to reduce tartar by binding to calcium in saliva. Calcium is responsible

for the hardening of soft plaque into tartar which can only be effectively removed with ultrasonic scaling.

## Greenies Dental Treats

*Greenies* are a nutritionally balanced treat with demonstrated efficacy in controlling plaque and tartar build up. Unlike other treats such as rawhide chews and pig's ears, teeth penetrate *greenies* all the way to the gum line. They are gentle on teeth and are of ingestion) so are less likely to cause the problems that are associated with feeding raw bones. *Greenies* should be fed every day to achieve maximum benefit.

*Greenies* are the only treat on the market endorsed by the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC). In combination with a dental diet, *Greenies* can reduce tartar build up by up to 60%. *Greenies* are available through Macarthur Vet Group – please ask our staff which size *Greenie* best suits your dog.

## Oral Cleansing Gels and Food/Water Additives

*Maxigard* is an oral cleansing gel containing Vitamin C and Zinc which helps to reduce plaque and bad breath by controlling odour causing bacteria<sup>1</sup>. It is suitable for animals that will not chew or allow brushing. It is applied to the teeth and gums either from your fingertip or direct from the bottle. For those pets where the application of anything to the mouth is a challenge, the food additive, *PlaqueOff* may be more appropriate. *PlaqueOff* is a tasty food additive derived from ocean algae (a seaweed extract). It prevents oral bacteria from producing plaque and tartar by disrupting the biofilm that develops on the tooth surface, thereby the ability of plaque to stick to it. It may also make existing tartar more porous and loose such that it falls away more easily upon biting into abrasive foods such as Royal Canin Dental. *PlaqueOff* capsules are registered for use in people.

## Raw Meaty Bones 2-3 times a week

This is the most natural way to clean the teeth. Feeding raw bones is a great way to keep your pet's teeth clean but does carry a small risk of fracturing teeth, intestinal obstruction or constipation so is no longer considered the best dental preventive. Raw chicken necks are good for cats and small dogs and possibly lamb shanks for large breed dogs. You should avoid very hard bones like beef femurs, and any split long bones, which are more likely to fracture the teeth. Never feed cooked bones.

It is still possible for raw bones to get wedged in your pet's mouth - across the roof of the mouth or over the molar teeth. This is uncommon, and easily fixed - just pull it out - or if you can't, come down and we'll do it for you.

## Antibiotics

May be prescribed by your veterinarian in cases of moderate to severe periodontitis and gingivitis. They kill bacteria on the teeth and gums, but are not a cure in themselves. They are often used in combination with other veterinary dental procedures.

***Teeth brushing and dental care products are important for the prevention of dental disease. But they may not remove existing tartar. This often requires veterinary treatment.***

If you have any other questions about tooth and gum care, please ask. Or bring your pet in, and we can examine their mouth and work out the most appropriate solution for your pet's problem(s).



## Veterinary Dental Procedures

Regular examination, a good diet and home dental care are the fundamentals of good tooth and gum care. But sometimes this just isn't enough. To give your pet's teeth a clean start, they may need to be scaled and polished. Here is what's involved:

**Antibiotics** will often be prescribed, to kill the plaque bacteria immediately before, during and after the clean. Pain-relief is provided where necessary.

**Anaesthesia** is required to properly clean and polish your pet's teeth. Anaesthesia is very safe and all animals are examined and assessed first. All patients have a tube placed in their throat that administers medical oxygen and anaesthetic gases throughout the procedure. Older and high-risk patients are offered blood and urine tests and the use of alternative drugs to ensure their safety. Please talk to one of our vets for more details.

**Scaling** of the plaque from the tooth is done with an ultrasonic scaler that vibrates and breaks up the tartar without damage to the tooth. All tooth surfaces are carefully scaled, both inside and out.

After mechanical scaling is complete, hand scalers are used to complete the removal of plaque and tartar from below the gum line. This is termed *root planing and subgingival curettage*.

**Polishing.** After scaling, the tooth can still have a rough surface that allows the re attachment of plaque. We have a variable speed dental polishing unit and use polishing paste that can restore a smooth healthy surface to the teeth, both above and below the gum line.

**Extractions** may be required if the tooth cannot be saved. The tooth may be broken, the roots may be rotten, the enamel may be too badly eroded, or the gums, bones and other supporting structures may be too far gone to continue to support the tooth. We are equipped with professional equipment including high-speed dental cutting burrs, elevators, forceps and root picks for such procedures. Sometimes it is only possible to decide if a tooth can be saved, after the tartar has been removed. Occasionally, whether to extract a tooth or try to save it may even be influenced by the owner's ability or willingness to keep the teeth and gums clean at home. Where brushing at home is not possible, it may be better to extract a tooth to ensure the health of the rest of the mouth.

**Other procedures** include dental X-rays, endodontics, root canal treatments, etc. We can discuss these more advanced procedures and arrange a referral if necessary.

**Dental records** are kept concerning the procedures performed, any teeth extracted, and any other abnormalities that are noted at the time. A re-check will generally be scheduled in 3-12 months, depending on our examination findings.

<sup>1</sup> Clarke DE (2006). Drinking water additive decreases plaque and calculus accumulation in cats. *J Vet Dent*, 23 (2):79-82