

Dental Disease

Dental disease is a common and often overlooked problem in pets. Tartar accumulation leads to irritation of the gums around the base of the teeth, ultimately leading to exposure of the roots. Potential outcomes of this tooth root exposure include gum infections and tooth loss.

Contributing Factors

One of the main factors determining the amount of tartar buildup is the individual chemistry in the mouth. Some animals need yearly cleanings after 3-8 years of age; other pets need a cleaning only once every few years or even once in a lifetime. In dogs, dry food is important to reduce the build-up of tartar. Because dry food is not as sticky as canned food, it does not adhere to the teeth as much and thus, does not cause tartar buildup as rapidly. However, eating dry food does not remove tartar from the teeth. Once tartar forms, a professional cleaning is necessary.

Clinical Signs

In some cases, owners are unaware of the dental disease. The problem may be identified with a routine physical examination or during investigation of another problem. In other situations, the probability of dental disease is apparent to the owner. The pet may have very bad breath (halitosis), difficulty eating, or changes in temperament.

The Cleaning Process

Proper cleaning of the teeth requires complete cooperation of the patient so that plaque and tartar can be removed properly. Anesthesia is required to *thoroughly* clean the teeth. To minimize risk, our hospital uses modern anesthetics that are deemed safe even for older animals. Blood may be drawn prior to anesthesia to evaluate blood cell counts and blood chemistry.

There are five steps in the cleaning process:

Scaling removes the tartar above and below the gum line. This is done with hand instruments and ultrasonic cleaning equipment. The tartar, which is under the gums, must be removed for a dental cleaning to be complete.

Polishing smooths the surface of the teeth, making them resistant to additional plaque formation.

Charting the teeth: this is a systematic exam and measurement of periodontal pockets of each tooth. If any abnormalities are found, such as periodontal disease or FORL's (feline odontoplastic resorptive lesions), treatment for each problem is done at this time.

Flushing removes dislodged tartar from the teeth and helps to remove the bacteria that accompany tartar.

Fluoride coating decreases teeth sensitivity, strengthens enamel, and decreases the rate of future plaque formation.

If there are teeth that have been chipped, had deep pockets or cavities, or are loose in the sockets, the veterinarian will determine the best course of treatment. Often, removal of the tooth will be best for the animal. Pets do not need all of their teeth for a happy lifestyle, and once the sockets heal, they can still eat solid/dry food. In other cases, dental radiographs are needed to determine the health of the tooth, and sometimes a root canal is the best method of dealing with a deep cavity. The veterinarian will need to make this determination while the pet is under anesthesia, and will complete all needed procedures immediately.

If a dental infection is not treated completely, the infection will accumulate in the mouth, resulting in gingivitis (gums), tonsillitis, and pharyngitis (sore throat). Infections within the mouth will be picked up by the blood stream and carried to other parts of the body. Kidney, liver and heart infections frequently begin in the mouth. The animal is frequently also sent home on antibiotics post-surgery and antibiotics are given via injection during the dental cleaning.

Prevention

1. Seek regular veterinary care and have the teeth cleaned when advised.
2. Try to maintain home dental care with *brushing the teeth*. Special toothbrushes and flavored toothpastes are available. We will be happy to show you how to do this and to recommend a schedule.