

## A Take on Your Pet's Teeth

Your pet's dental health is very important. Believe it or not, their teeth and gums are as vulnerable to disease as your own. Dental disease is the most common problem our pets face. As a matter of fact, February has been declared nationally as Dental Health Month to help raise awareness of dental issues. Just as in your mouth, plaque begins to accumulate when bacteria living on the remnants of food in the mouth combine with saliva and food debris. Days later, minerals in the saliva cause plaque to harden to form tarter or calculus. Continual accumulation causes inflammation of the gums, gingivitis, which is noticed as a reddening of the gums close to the tooth. This is also the major cause of halitosis or bad breath. This may be the smell you notice if your pet happens to surprise you with a kiss! Eventually, periodontal disease begins when the tarter builds up under the gum line, separating the deep bony structures of the jaw from the teeth to form pockets and abscesses that encourage even more bacterial growth. This damage will further lead to tooth loss, bleeding gums, and eating difficulties that are easily overlooked. Ultimately, the untreated disease may allow bacteria to enter the bloodstream and cause damage to vital organs. Check your pet's mouth today to see if you notice any of these changes.

Vigorous chewing on very hard objects or accidental injury during play can fracture teeth, just as in people. Check for broken or worn teeth when you examine your pet's mouth.

Ever wonder what goes on when the vet does an oral exam? The face and head are examined for symmetry, swelling, or discharges, the oral cavity, oral mucosa and surfaces of teeth and gums are examined, and the inner surfaces of the teeth and gums and the tongue, palates, tonsils, and the area underneath the tongue are examined.

If a cleaning, also called a prophylaxis, is needed, here is what you can expect. While under general anesthesia, flushing of the mouth with an antibacterial solution, cleaning the teeth with handheld and ultrasonic scalers to remove the calculus from above and below the gum line, polishing the teeth to remove microscopic scratches, inspecting each tooth and gum around it for any signs of disease, full mouth radiographs to further evaluate what can't be seen below the gums, and any extractions or other treatments deemed necessary, followed by advice on follow up and home dental care protocols. Brushing and caring for your pet's teeth at home can reduce the need for veterinary dental care and keep your pet's teeth and breathe squeaky clean!

To help decrease the need for vet dental care, home care should begin early, even before the pet loses its baby teeth (4-6 months old). Once your pet has become accustomed to the brush, you can start using an enzymatic pet toothpaste, never a human toothpaste. The fluoride in human toothpaste can cause toxic effects in your pet. If your pet resists you handling its mouth, there are a variety of other approaches and aids. For example, oral hygiene gels, chew toys and specifically formulated dental chew products and diets. However, with patience and time even older pets can learn to have their teeth brushed.