

Dental Disease in Dogs

— WHAT KINDS OF DENTAL DISEASE DO DOGS GET?

The most common problem we see in dogs is called *periodontal disease*. Periodontal disease is inflammation of the gums and loss of the bone that support the teeth. Symptoms include:

- bleeding, swollen gums,
- loose and missing teeth,
- bad breath.

Gum inflammation also allows bacteria from the mouth into the bloodstream—from there they may cause problems in rest of the body including the heart, kidneys, and liver.

Although we know that the **inflammation caused by periodontal disease is painful**, dogs usually don't show obvious signs of pain, and will continue to eat even with severe disease. Periodontal disease always gets worse over time, but with care we can slow its progression.

— WHAT CAUSES PERIODONTAL DISEASE?

Periodontal disease is caused by the buildup of bacteria and food on the tooth surface and below the gum line, making a sticky film called plaque. Unless the plaque is removed, it hardens into a crust called tartar. This hardening takes about 48 hours. By the age of 3 most dogs already have some tartar, and over time it can cover the entire surface of the tooth.

The bacteria that live in tartar cause gum inflammation (called *gingivitis*). Over time, the gums and the bone that support teeth shrink away. These teeth are more likely to get infected, and eventually may become loose and fall out.

— WHAT CAN I DO TO KEEP MY DOG'S TEETH HEALTHY?

The best way to maintain your dog's oral health is to brush his or her teeth daily.

Brushing daily removes plaque before it can become tartar and cause inflammation. We have given you a separate handout with suggestions on how to get started brushing your dog's teeth.

Even with the best at-home dental care, tartar can accumulate on teeth over time. We will examine your dog's teeth regularly, and if tartar has built up on the teeth or if there are signs of gum disease, we may recommend a dental and oral examination and cleaning.

In addition to brushing, or when brushing is not possible, other products such as **dental chews, diets, and water additives** can help slow plaque and tartar formation. Please ask a vet about options!

Oral Examination and Treatment of Dental Disease

— WHAT HAPPENS WHEN MY DOG'S TEETH GET CLEANED?

We will do much more than just clean your dog's teeth! There are three main steps:

1. **Clean** the teeth to remove tartar and plaque;
2. **Evaluate** the teeth, gums, and surrounding bone. This is done both by hand and with x-rays. The rest of the mouth is checked for any abnormal lumps, swelling, or injury. Once the oral examination is complete, we can decide what treatments are needed to restore your dog's dental health;
3. **Treat** any disease:
 - For dogs with mild periodontal disease, careful cleaning above **and below** the gum line is often enough to reverse gingivitis and slow the progression of disease.
 - For severely affected teeth, the risks of keeping those teeth outweigh any benefits. In these cases, oral surgery to remove the diseased teeth is the best way to eliminate ongoing pain, inflammation, and infection.
 - If many teeth need to be removed, we may need to spread the extractions over more than one visit.
 - For teeth affected by other conditions, (such as broken or discolored teeth), or for treatment requiring advanced dental techniques, we may recommend seeing a dental specialist.

— DOES MY DOG NEED TO BE UNDER ANESTHESIA?

Yes, for several reasons.

- Dogs and cats do not understand what's happening during a dental cleaning, and would find the bright lights and noisy equipment near their mouths very stressful.
- Removing tartar and plaque from **below** the gum line is the most effective and important way to slow the progression of periodontal disease. The tissue below the gum line is delicate, and to clean there safely and thoroughly your dog must be still.
- Tooth extraction is oral surgery, and anesthesia is absolutely necessary for the safety and comfort of your dog.
- You may have heard of "anesthesia-free," or "awake" dental cleaning. Although this may make the teeth *look* clean, **it is not possible to remove plaque and tartar from below the gum line** without anesthesia. Since that's where the plaque that causes gingivitis and periodontal disease lives, cleaning only the part of the tooth that you can see **does nothing** to prevent dental disease, and may make unhealthy teeth look healthier than they are.