

DENTAL DISEASE

What kinds of dental problems do dogs have?

Dental disease is as common in dogs as it is in people. The most common form of dental disease in man is decay or caries. In the dog the most common problem is periodontal disease. Tartar builds up and causes irritation of the gums around the base of the teeth. The resulting inflammation is gingivitis. The gums ultimately recede exposing the roots, which leads to infection, and ultimately tooth loss.

How can I prevent dental disease?

Starting your dog on raw meaty bones as a puppy is the most successful way to develop this important habit. The gnawing action cleanses the food debris from the teeth and prevents its accumulation and hardening as dental tartar, which results in gum disease. Raw bones should be fed at least twice weekly, daily if possible. Cooked bones should never be fed. Some small breed dogs will not chew bones. They can be offered a teeth-cleaning biscuit eg. the "Hill's t/d" diet, which abrade the teeth better than normal dry food.

Dry food as well as canine chews and other gnawing toys do reduce the amount of tartar accumulating on the teeth. Tartar is basically the result of a build up of invisible plaque on the teeth so if bones or teeth-cleaning diets are not accepted frequently by your dog, daily tooth brushing should be tried, if the dog will cooperate. Once tartar has formed, professional cleaning under a general anaesthetic is necessary in order to remove it.

Some dogs need yearly cleanings; other dogs need a cleaning only once every few years. It is well worthwhile discussing dental hygiene for your dog with your veterinary surgeon as regular prevention is preferable.

What does tartar do to the teeth?

If tartar is allowed to remain on the teeth, several things may happen.

The tartar will mechanically push the gums away from the roots of the teeth. This allows the teeth to loosen in their sockets and infection to enter the root socket. The teeth will loosen and fall out or have to be extracted.

Infection will accumulate in the mouth, resulting in gingivitis, tonsillitis, and pharyngitis (sore throat). Although antibiotics may temporarily suppress the infection, if the tartar is not removed from the teeth, infection will return quickly.

Infection within the mouth will be picked up by the blood stream and carried to other parts of the body. Some kidney and heart disease may be caused by this infection.

What is involved in cleaning my dog's teeth?

Proper cleaning of the teeth requires complete cooperation of the patient so plaque and tartar can be removed properly. For the dog, general anaesthesia is required to thoroughly clean the teeth. Although anaesthesia always carries a degree of risk, the modern drugs in use in practice today minimise this risk, even for older dogs. Depending on your dog's age and general health status, your veterinary surgeon may advise a prior blood test to evaluate liver and kidney function and general health status of the patient.

Two steps are involved in the cleaning process:

Scaling removes the tartar above and below the gum line. This is done with hand instruments and ultrasonic cleaning equipment.

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

Teeth with infected or exposed roots are extracted.

What type of scheduling is needed for teeth cleaning?

An appointment will be necessary and you will be asked not to feed the dog for approximately eight hours before the procedure. Fluids with the exception of water should also be withheld.

On collection you may be asked to return after a few days to check that all is well, particularly if any extractions have been carried out. Advice regarding dental prophylaxis, provision of raw bones, brushing, cleaning and use of anti-plaque products etc. may be given.

One useful way of getting your dog accustomed to brushing the teeth is to use an old toothbrush dipped in the dog's dinner since feeding time is, after all, the highpoint of the day for your pet. Unlike us, brushing of the outside of the teeth is all that is really required. A dog's tongue is sufficiently mobile that most of the plaque and in consequence, tartar, is removed from the inside (lingual) surface of the teeth automatically. Once your pet has become accustomed to this procedure it is a simple step to move to the use of special toothpastes which, unlike ours, are meant to be swallowed and are usually meat or malt flavoured. **DO NOT USE HUMAN DENTIFRICES**, these are foaming products and are not meant to be swallowed and will be universally resented by the dog.

Remember that feeding of raw bones is the simplest, most natural and healthiest option to maintaining healthy teeth.