



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 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. Here are some suggestions:

- **Check your pet's teeth regularly (including the 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 First Paw check the teeth at least once a year** (we can also do this as part of your pet's annual health check and vaccination). If necessary, we will recommend appropriate treatment to restore your pet's teeth and gums to good health. See below for some of the veterinary dental procedures available.



- **Try brushing** or one of the various products available to minimise the build-up of plaque and tartar.

DENTAL DISEASE AFFECTS 85% OF ALL DOGS ANDS CATS OVER THREE YEARS OF AGE. BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THAT WAY!

Preventative Home Dental Care

Brush your Pet's teeth. Most clients laugh at this suggestion due to the impracticality. But the truth is this is the gold standard in pet dental hygiene, reducing up to 100% of plaque when performed effectively.

Effective Tooth brushing is dependent on a cooperative pet and a patient owner! Human toothpastes are unsuitable, due to their taste, foaming action and high fluoride content. They are not meant to be swallowed. Toothpastes have been designed specifically for animals that come in a variety of flavours that most pets will accept. There are also finger brushes - thimble-like brushes that are much easier to control inside the mouth of cats and small dogs. Small toothbrushes with very soft bristles are OK for larger dogs. To get your pet used to brushing, it is wise to start with just your finger (perhaps flavoured with food), then try a bit of toothpaste on your finger, then finally start using the brush. You usually 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 until your pet will let you clean their whole mouth in one sitting. Your pet's teeth should be brushed at least 2-3 times per week.

Hill's Prescription diet – Dental Care (T/D). 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. 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.

Hill's Dental Care T/D is different to normal dry feed. With its unique shape and size, and special fibre matrix technology, T/D mechanically helps clean your pet's teeth. 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 an apple). T/D is fully balanced so can be your pet's sole diet. This means that whenever they eat, good dental care is being implemented.

OraVet Dental Hygiene Chews work via dual action to clean the teeth and freshen the breath. Their unique ingredient delmopinol works by creating a barrier and protecting teeth from plaque, calculus and bad breath. When used daily, they are very effective at cleaning and protecting the teeth.



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 soluble (breaking down completely within 24 hours 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%.

Oral Cleansing Gels and Water Additives - For those pets where the application of anything to the mouth is a challenge, a water additive called **Healthymouth** is 100% natural with valid clinical studies proving effective plaque control. Healthymouth also controls bad breath and comes with a 100% palatability guarantee.

Simply Seaweed is a tasty food supplement made from ocean algae (a seaweed extract). Simply Seaweed 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 so that it falls away more easily upon biting into abrasive foods such as Hill's Dental Care T/D. For more info go to Simply Seaweed in our Handy Resources section.

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 the risk of fracturing teeth, intestinal obstruction, pancreatitis & constipation. As such we prefer the other dental preventatives discussed above. If you do decide to feed bones we recommend avoiding very hard bones like beef femurs, and any split long bones, which are more likely to fracture the teeth. Never feed cooked bones!!

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 attention.

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. Anti-inflammatories and pain-relievers are also given where necessary.

Anaesthesia is required to properly clean and polish your pet's teeth. Anaesthesia is usually 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 us 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. A variable speed dental polishing unit and polishing paste is used to restore a smooth healthy surface to the teeth, both above and below the gum line.



Dog's Teeth Before Dental Cleaning



Dog's Teeth After Dental Cleaning

Extractions are often required where 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. Most clinics are equipped with professional equipment including high-speed dental cutting burs, 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 is generally advised within 3 - 12 months, depending on examination findings.