

## Complete Dental Care

*Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff*



Our pets are living longer now than in the past. Today, we have better preventive medicine (e.g., vaccinations) and better ways to diagnose and treat many diseases. Now we are seeing more animals whose most severe medical problems are dental problems. To prevent oral disease, which is the number one health problem diagnosed in pets, it is essential to provide our pets with good dental care, both professionally and at home.

### **Dental disease in dogs and cats**

**Plaque:** Dogs or cats rarely get cavities, but are much more prone to gum disease and excess tartar buildup on the teeth. Food particles and bacteria collect along the gumline, forming plaque. Routine home dental care can remove this plaque.



**Tartar:** If plaque is not removed, minerals in the saliva combine with the plaque and form tartar (or calculus), which adheres strongly to the teeth. Plaque starts to mineralize 48 hours after it forms. Tartar is irritating to the gums and causes inflammation, called gingivitis. This can be seen as reddening of the gums adjacent to the teeth. It also causes bad breath. Once tartar appears, it is best to have a professional cleaning done by your veterinarian, who will use special instruments to remove the plaque and then polish the teeth to make it more difficult for plaque to adhere to them.

**Periodontal disease:** If tartar is not removed, it builds up under the gums. It separates the gums from the teeth to form "pockets" and encourages even more bacterial growth. At this point the damage is irreversible, and called "periodontal"

disease. It can be very painful and can lead to loose teeth, abscesses, and bone loss or infection. As bacterial growth continues to increase, the bacteria may enter the bloodstream. This can cause infection of the heart valves (endocarditis), liver, and kidneys. If treated by your veterinarian with special instruments and procedures, periodontal disease can be slowed or stopped.

### **What is included in a good dental care program?**

The 3 keys to complete dental care are:

1. Regular visits to your veterinarian, which include an oral exam
2. Veterinary dental cleaning as advised
3. Daily home oral care

**1.) Oral exams by your veterinarian:** A thorough dental exam can identify potential problems such as plaque and tartar buildup, gingivitis, periodontal disease, and fractured or abscessed teeth. During an oral exam your veterinarian will:

- Examine the face and head for asymmetry, swelling, or discharges.
- Examine the oral cavity, oral mucosa, and surfaces of teeth and gums.
- Open the mouth to examine the inner surfaces of the teeth and gums and the tongue, palates, oral mucosa, tonsils, and ventral tongue area.

**2.) Dental cleaning by your veterinarian:** To prevent dental disease, your pet needs routine dental care at home. To perform good home care, you need to start with clean teeth. Brushing will remove plaque but not tartar. So if your pet's teeth have tartar, it is necessary for your veterinarian to remove it and polish the teeth. This professional veterinary dental cleaning is also called a prophylaxis or "prophy." A routine dental cleaning consists of:



- Anesthetizing your pet and flushing the mouth with a solution to kill the bacteria.
- Cleaning the teeth with handheld and ultrasonic scalers. All calculus is removed from above and below the gumline.
- Using a disclosing solution to show any areas of remaining plaque, which are then removed.
- Polishing the teeth to remove microscopic scratches.
- Inspecting each tooth and the gum around it for any signs of disease.
- Flushing the mouth, again, with an antibacterial solution.

- Recording any abnormalities or additional procedures on a dental chart. (Radiographs - x-rays - may be taken to evaluate the roots of the teeth and the bone.)
- Determining the best follow-up and home dental care program for your pet.

**3.) Daily home oral care:** Home oral care includes routine examinations of your pet's mouth and brushing her teeth.

*Home oral exam* - As you care for your pet's mouth, look for warning signs of gum disease such as bad breath, red and swollen gums, a yellow-brown crust of tartar around the gumline, and pain or bleeding when you touch the gums or mouth. You should also watch for discolored, fractured, or missing teeth. Any bumps or masses within the mouth should also be checked by your veterinarian.

*Daily brushing* - Regular brushing of your pet's teeth is a very important preventive for oral and other diseases. A step-by-step procedure for providing this care is found in our articles:

- > [Brushing Your Dog's Teeth](#)
- > [Brushing Your Cat's Teeth](#)

How long would **you** go without brushing your teeth?

*Mechanical removal of plaque* - For dogs, mechanical removal of plaque can also be accomplished by using toys such as [Nylabone Dental Chews](#) or [Quado Bones Dog Treats](#). Daily treats designed to scrape away plaque, such as the [Drs. Foster & Smith Dental Brushes](#) or [Dental Sticks](#), are another option. Do not use toys that are abrasive and can wear down the teeth. If your dog is an aggressive chewer and likes to bite down, trying to crack the toy, you probably should not let the dog chew on that toy. For especially aggressive chewers, look for toys they cannot get their mouths around.



#### **What is ahead in the future?**

Veterinary dentistry is becoming more common and more sophisticated. Pets can have the same procedures as people: root canals, crowns, and even braces. The Veterinary Oral Health Council is an organization of veterinary dentists who will help lead all of us in this rather new field. They have developed a seal of acceptance for pet dental products, just as the American Dental Association has its seal of approval. Scientific studies are continuously being done on other products, and when they are proven to be effective, they will be eligible for approval.

View all of our [Dog Dental Care](#) or [Cat Dental Care](#) products!