

# **Your Pets Need Dental Care Too!**

8 out of 10 pets have dental disease by age 3. This should not be surprising, as pets do not brush their teeth or floss daily. There is little difference between dog and cat teeth and ours. Just imagine what your teeth would look like if you went three years without brushing and skipped the biannual visits to the dentist for professional cleaning!

A study performed in 2011 asked over a thousand dog and cat owners about their pet's oral health. Only 20% of people polled with pets over 3 years of age felt their pet had dental disease. So what are the signs of dental disease? How can pet owners pick up on problems in their pet's mouth? What can be done to keep pets healthy?

Some of the signs of dental disease:

- Bad breath
- Food falling out of the mouth or chewing with only one side of the mouth
- Facial swelling or recurrent sores on the face
- Blood in the water bowl or on chew toys
- Loose teeth or teeth covered with tartar
- Loss of appetite or loss of weight
- Resistance to having the mouth examined or pain when the mouth is touched
- Changes in behavior such as less interest in playing, changes in food preference, sleeping more, etc

Periodontal disease is one of the most common dental problems in both dogs and cats. Periodontal disease means disease around the tooth. There is a range of periodontal disease, from gingivitis to loss of teeth. Periodontal disease starts with plaque. Plaque is a combination of bacteria, salivary proteins, and food debris. If plaque is not routinely removed with brushing it will harden and turn into tartar (calculus). Plaque and tartar cause inflammation of the gums, called gingivitis. Tartar further enables the spread of plaque and promotes the growth of harmful bacteria. As tartar and plaque spread beneath the gums, the ligaments that hold the teeth in place become damaged, leading to pockets around the teeth. Left untreated, the bone around the teeth can be eroded and the teeth will become mobile. Worst case scenario is that the jaw can break from damage to the bone. Studies have linked kidney, heart, liver, and pulmonary disease with severe periodontal disease. In people, there is also a link with dental disease and difficulty controlling diabetes.

What can be done about periodontal disease? Yearly professional cleanings under anesthesia and oral exams are an important part of preventing and treating dental disease. Professional cleaning involves a complete oral exam, scaling, and polishing. X-rays may be used to evaluate problem areas. While addressing cleaning teeth we can evaluate your pet's mouth for some of the other common problems seen including fractured teeth, resorptive lesions (cats), and oral masses.

What about prevention of periodontal disease? Home care is the most important part of a pet's dental program. The goal of home care is to remove plaque and prevent tartar accumulation, preventing periodontal disease. Home care routines must be done daily or at least several times a week to be beneficial, think of being in it for the long haul. Even with home care, most pets will need a professional cleaning yearly.

Plaque can be removed by mechanical or chemical methods. Brushing the teeth is the single most effective way of maintaining oral health. Plaque is soft and can easily be removed with daily brushing. Almost all dogs and most cats will allow their teeth to be brushed. To be effective, brushing must be done daily or at least several times a week. It is easiest to start brushing your pet's teeth when they are puppies or kittens. Adult dogs and cats can get used to it too, but to be successful it should be slowly introduced. If dental disease is already present, a veterinarian should perform a cleaning and address any problems before starting a tooth brushing program.

Chlorhexidine is the most effective anti-plaque antiseptic. It is used in a variety of products including oral rinses and gels, chew treats, etc. These products are a good supplement to brushing but are not meant to replace brushing. They may be a good option for pets that will not allow brushing. There are also dental diets available for dogs and cats. These diets are specially designed to remove plaque from the surface of teeth, reduce tartar accumulation, and reduce gingivitis.

Chewing is another way of keeping the teeth in the back of the mouth clean. Providing chew toys or edible chewy treats for pets on a daily basis can help remove plaque and tartar. The safety of chew toys, treats, and dental products should be considered. For example bones, antlers, nylon toys, and products like cow hooves are too hard to be chewed safely. Chewing on these types of products is not recommended for any dog due to the risk of fractured teeth. Some products are not safe for all dogs – for example some dogs will swallow rawhides whole or tear off and swallow pieces of rope toys. The owner should monitor how their pet chews on rawhides and toys to determine if it is safe.

When selecting dental care products, be cautious of miracle products you may see. If something seems too good to be true, it probably is. The Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) was developed to provide guidance and help owners and veterinarians select effective products. They perform tests on dental products for pets to determine if the product does what it claims. If it does then it receives the VOHC Seal of Acceptance. The VOHC has a list of approved oral health products on their website ([www.vohc.org](http://www.vohc.org)).

**February is National Pet Dental Health Month. Elk Meadow Animal Hospital is offering discounts on all Dental Services February and March. If you have a pet in need of dental care call 303-674-7400.**