

# Oral Health

## THE FOUNDATION FOR PET WELLBEING

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Most of us brush our teeth at least twice a day, starting when we first begin to see our teeth come in as small children. Besides just reducing bad breath, this daily ritual also protects our teeth and gums from tartar, plaque, and bacteria. Even with this diligent care, many people still get cavities, need root canals, or lose teeth as we age. It's hard to imagine how much build-up would be present if we didn't brush our teeth regularly, or how it would affect the health of our teeth and gums. If you ever want to find out what it would look like, however, the answer is not far away - just take a peek



into your dog or cat's mouth.

Dental health for our pets has come a long way in the last 20 years, however, many pet owners don't realize that their pet's teeth and gums are at risk for the same types of dental problems that we suffer from as humans. Pets can have periodontal disease and tooth fractures commonly. They can require root canals and crowns. They can get tooth root abscesses, need oral surgery, sometimes even require orthodontics! Many general practices now offer a wide variety of dental therapy and treatments, but for many of

the more specialized services, such as the crowns, root canals and orthodontics mentioned previously, a consultation with a veterinary dentist may be warranted.

Dental health is considered by many to be the foundation for maintaining good overall health for our pets. Plaque, which contains bacteria, builds up on the teeth and under the gums, then solidifies into calculus (tartar) and becomes tightly adhered to the tooth. The inflammation, tissue and bone destruction this causes is called periodontal disease. The continued presence of bacteria within the plaque and tartar allows it to continuously shower the rest of the



body, enabling bacteria to affect any organ or system in the body. It also directly affects the gum and bone tissue surrounding the affected tooth (or teeth). The body's immune system arrives to try and fight off the bacteria, but since the immune system is unable to remove the build up of plaque, it actually begins to break down the patient's own gum, tooth and bone tissue, leading to tooth loss, infection, bone loss, inflammation and recession of the gums, bleeding, and pain. It is easy to tell when this type of tartar and plaque begins to build up on your pet's teeth. Most pet owner's first indication is

a bad odor coming from their pet's mouth, which is caused by bacteria. In addition, a brief look at your pet's teeth will reveal a brownish or yellow film over the teeth, beginning at the gum line. Inflammation of the gum line (gingivitis) is the beginning of periodontal disease. As the patient's disease progresses, more obvious symptoms become apparent, such as bleeding from the gums, discomfort when eating or unwillingness to eat, dropping food from the mouth, drooling, and pain to the touch. An example of moderate dental disease can be seen below in Image A, as well as a more advanced case in Image B.

Just like for people, the best way to keep your pet from experiencing these problems is prevention. There are a wide variety of animal dental products available, including toothpaste specifically designed for your pet (human toothpaste should not be used on pets), and many different styles of toothbrushes. Your family veterinarian is a great resource for preventative care, and maintenance of your pet's dental needs. Most general practitioners have many different dental services available, including routine checks, animal toothbrushes and toothpaste, dental cleanings (which include scaling and polishing) and even tooth extractions in severe cases. For instances where a more specialized dental procedure or service is required, however, a referral and consultation with a veterinary dentist is likely warranted. Speak with your family veterinarian about your pet's dental status, and give your pet a solid foundation of health for the future!