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Dental Care for Dogs and Cats

Dogs and cats lose their 'baby' teeth at around 6 months of age, replacing them with permanent adult teeth. These teeth then have to last the rest of the pet's life so it is important that we learn to look after them properly. As in people, infection in the gums can spread to other body organs, particularly the heart and kidneys.

What type of dental disease do dogs and cats get?

PERIODONTAL DISEASE

The main type of dental disease in dogs, cats and people occurs when plaque forms on the teeth. Plaque is a sticky layer of saliva, food particles and bacteria, which coats the teeth, especially at the margin between the tooth and the gum.

Over time, the plaque becomes hardened and solid - we call this tartar. Tartar is yellowish brown in colour. It may be seen as small patches on the teeth, or can form large blocks that completely cover and obscure the teeth underneath.

The bacteria in the plaque and tartar are able to move from the tooth surface and squeeze underneath the gum at its attachment to the tooth. Chemicals released by the bacteria and the body's immune system cause the gums to loosen their attachment on the tooth, and the gum becomes tender, red and swollen.

If the tartar is removed at this point, and the teeth are kept clean, the gum can reattach and no permanent damage is done.

However, if the gum disease continues, the bone and ligaments holding each tooth in place become affected. This leads to



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permanent loosening of the teeth. Tooth root abscesses can also occur at this point.

FRACTURED TEETH

Teeth can be fractured (broken) by accidents and falls and biting on hard surfaces. If fractures occur right at the tip, the tooth can repair itself to seal the damage and the tooth can remain comfortable and stable.

If the fracture is deeper down, the inside of the tooth (the pulp) is exposed to the germs inside the mouth and pain, abscesses, discolouration and tooth loosening are likely to occur.

RESORPTIVE LESIONS

Resorptive lesions are mostly seen in cats and are rare in dogs and people. Resorptive lesions occur when part of the tooth surface is dissolved away, exposing the inside of the tooth (the pulp). This dissolving happens because the body's immune system wrongly attacks the tooth surface. This is a genetic condition, and is most commonly seen in cats between the ages of 4 and 7. It cannot be prevented by brushing or feeding a special diet. Once teeth have resorptive lesions they are painful, and will not get better. If they are left untreated, the weakened teeth may snap off, leaving the roots behind.

What should we be doing to look after our pet's teeth?

Good dental care is broadly the same in cats and dogs as it is in people:



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1. Daily home care
2. Regular examination of the mouth by a dental professional (every 6-12 months)
3. Cleaning (scaling and polishing) the teeth, further assessment and treatment by a dental professional if any concerns are identified on the annual examination

1. Daily home care

Brushing your pet's teeth once or twice daily with a pet toothpaste and soft toothbrush is the best way to keep your pet's teeth and gums in good condition.

Pet toothpastes are available from the veterinary surgery, pet shops and online and should be tasty (so that your pet looks forward to tooth brushing), non-toxic, non-foaming and, ideally, contain additional enzymes to help break down plaque.

Pet toothbrushes can be rubber 'finger brushes' that slip over a finger like thimble (good when you first set out, so that you can feel what you are doing); textured cloths; or proper, soft toothbrushes (dog toothbrushes have a longer handle and more angled head than a human toothbrush).

Your main aim is to brush the outside of the teeth along each side of your pet's mouth. Pay particular attention to the area where the tooth meets the gum. Don't worry about brushing the insides of the teeth unless you and your dog are very proficient at tooth brushing, as problems develop much more slowly on this part of the tooth. Usually, the most important teeth to brush are the upper



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canines (fangs) and the upper back molars (the grinding teeth right at the back, behind your pet's upper lip).

We have a video of our nurses brushing their dog's teeth available on our website at www.acornhousevets.co.uk (located under the 'services' tab, entitled 'dental care') and our veterinary nurses offer free of charge dental brushing demonstrations and advice (please book at Reception).

WHAT ABOUT OTHER FORMS OF HOME CARE?

Nothing works as well as regular tooth brushing and we strongly encourage pet owners to introduce their pets to the brushing process from an early age. But what if your pet is set in his/her ways and will not tolerate tooth brushing? Many cats and some dogs fall into this category.

Various dental chews and treats have been designed to scrape or scrub the teeth as your pet chews. This is not a perfect solution as dogs have 42 teeth and cats have 30 and not all of them are involved in chewing, but it is better than nothing. Some dry diets such as Hills T/D and Vet Essentials have been designed so that the kibble has a similar 'rubbing' effect on the teeth.

Enzymatic toothpastes (such as Logic) can be rubbed onto a cat's paw to be licked off; and food supplements such as 'plaque off' can be fed - both of these methods aim to chemically dissolve the plaque from the teeth. They are probably better than nothing, but there is a reason why people brush their teeth twice daily instead



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of using these methods - nothing is as effective as regular brushing.

A slow-release oral hygiene paste (Dentisept) is now available which coats the teeth and slowly releases antiseptic and anti-plaque properties over 24 hrs. It can be applied along the gumline using the applicator provided, but even putting a small amount anywhere into the pet's mouth will be beneficial as it spreads throughout the mouth in the saliva. This is probably the next best option after brushing and should be done daily.

2. Regular examination by a veterinary surgeon

All pets should have a full health check every year, and more often if they are elderly or unwell. A full health check includes an examination of your pet's teeth, gums and mouth. For many pets, this health check happens when they come to the veterinary surgery for their annual vaccination, but you can book your pet in to see the vet at any time of the year. It is a condition of many insurance policies that this examination is performed every year and recorded on your pet's clinical notes.

At Acorn House, we use a standardised grading scheme for dental disease, so that every pet receives a dental grade from 0 (no gum or dental disease) to 4 (severe dental disease) and any teeth with fractures or resorptive lesions in them are also recorded.

3. Further cleaning, assessment and treatment by a veterinary surgeon



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If the regular examination detects any problems, further assessment and treatment is needed. Cats and dogs with a dental grade of 2 or higher, and/or any fractures or resorptive lesions fall into this category. This stage of treatment is performed with your pet asleep under anaesthetic, as this is the only way that we can thoroughly examine and treat the teeth in cats and dogs.

All pets are given a vet check and a small blood test just before the anaesthetic, to make sure that it is safe for the anaesthetic to go ahead. All anaesthetised pets receive constant monitoring, with oxygen, intravenous fluids, and blood pressure monitoring as standard.

The veterinary surgeon will clean the plaque and tartar from every surface of every tooth, using an ultrasonic scaler. In pets that do not tolerate tooth brushing, or even those that do, but are unlucky enough to develop tartar build-up despite this, an annual anaesthetic and thorough descale of the teeth will quite likely be all that is needed to keep the mouth in good condition so that teeth do not become loose or rotten and require extraction. After every bit of plaque and tartar has been removed from the teeth, the tooth surfaces are polished to leave a smooth surface that is harder for new plaque and bacteria to attach to.

Once the teeth have been thoroughly cleaned, the veterinary surgeon can examine the teeth and gums in detail. A dental probe can be used to check that the gums are firmly attached all around each tooth, and a careful check is made for any additional



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damage, such as fractures or resorptive lesions that may have been hidden underneath the tartar.

If any of the teeth appear to be damaged, the veterinary surgeon will recommend that dental Xrays are taken, so that we can see what is happening to the tooth root and inside of the tooth and surrounding jaw bone.

Sometimes Xrays show that the damage to the teeth is minor and no further action is needed. Other times, if the tooth is irreversibly damaged and likely to cause discomfort or infection in the near future, the veterinary surgeon will telephone you and recommend that the tooth is extracted. Remember that cats and dogs have a lot more teeth than we do, so even if several teeth are extracted, they will still have plenty left! Once the extraction sites have healed, the gums become very hard and tough, so that even dogs and cats with very few teeth can still happily eat biscuits.

What is involved in tooth extraction?

Cats and dogs have some teeth with short, simple, cone-shaped roots and these teeth are usually quite straightforward to extract. Other teeth, such as the long canine (fang) teeth, and the back molar (chewing) teeth have very long roots. Extracting these teeth is similar to extracting wisdom teeth from people - surgery is needed to lift a flap of gum and bone up, so that the long roots can be removed, and then the gum is stitched back down using dissolving stitches. Xrays are taken of the teeth before and after extraction, to make sure that the roots are all removed completely and the surrounding jaw bone is in good condition.



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Can there be complications with tooth extraction?

Again, exactly the same difficulties that human dentists may encounter when removing people's teeth can occur when veterinary surgeons remove pets' teeth. Extractions, particularly of the large teeth with long roots, can lead to discomfort at the extraction site for several days and all pets having extractions will be sent home with pain relief medication for this reason.

Extraction sites can also become infected, so many patients will have antibiotics at the time of extraction.

Sometimes, the root of a tooth may be exceptionally difficult to remove, or the root may move into a position where it is not safe to reach it. In these circumstances it can be appropriate to leave the root fragment where it is and monitor to make sure that the root is not causing any problems, rather than cause additional trauma trying to retrieve it. Alternatively, referral to a specialist may be offered.

In elderly dogs and cats with significant periodontal disease affecting a number of teeth, the jaw bone may have become very weak over the years. If this is the case, it can be that the only thing holding the jaw together is the tartar on the teeth! Simply cleaning the tartar off, or removing the diseased teeth, may mean that the jaw bone on its own is not strong enough, and the jaw may fracture during the dental process or over the next few days when the dog tries to bite and chew. Taking Xrays before extracting teeth helps us to identify which dogs and cats are at



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risk of this complication, and if it occurs, the jaw should heal with supportive care.

Summary

- Dogs and cats need regular dental care to keep their mouths comfortable and healthy.
- If you can, brush your pet's teeth daily
- Have your pet's teeth checked by the vet every year
- If your pet develops plaque and tartar on the teeth, have the teeth descaled under general anaesthetic. It may be necessary to do this regularly (maybe every year, if you are unable to brush).
- It is much nicer for your pet to have regular cleaning at home and/or under anaesthetic than it is to wait for several years and then have to have lots of teeth extracted.
- It is also less expensive to have regular cleaning at home and/or under anaesthetic than it is to wait for several years and then have to have lots of teeth extracted.
- Some cats are genetically prone to resorptive lesions. Unfortunately these cats will require extractions regardless of how well you keep the teeth clean.

Pricing

It is often not possible to see exactly what dental work needs doing until your dog or cat is asleep and the teeth have been



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cleaned and examined properly. For this reason, it is important that we have a telephone number for you whilst your pet is staying with us for dental treatment. The veterinary surgeon can telephone you once the teeth have been cleaned and assessed and advise you as to any further treatment that is suggested, along with the associated costs. At this point you can let the vet know whether to go ahead with the recommended treatment straight away, or whether to wake your pet up and schedule the treatment for another time. A general pricing guide is provided here:

DENTAL ASSESSMENT, SCALE AND POLISH (including blood test, pre-medication drugs, anaesthetic fluids, and monitoring, dental home care of toothpaste and brush OR long-acting plaque protection paste)

Cats £334

Dogs <12.5kg £363

Dogs 12.6-25kg £393

Dogs 25.1-37kg £438

Dogs 37.1-50kg £472

Dogs >50kg £511

DENTAL XRAYS

up to 4 Xrays £75

5-10 Xrays £104



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11+ Xrays £151

DENTAL SURGERY (including extractions, gum suturing, post-operative Xrays, antibiotics, pain relief, post-operative check ups)

£431 - £900 depending on number and type of teeth to be extracted

Insurance

Some insurance policies cover any type of dental treatment as long as your pet has a dental check up every year and you follow the advice given at each check up.

Others do not pay out for dental conditions at all.

Many insurance companies only pay for dental disease if it is the result of an accident (fractured teeth) or medical condition (resorptive lesions).

Ask your veterinary surgeon to write down what type of dental disease your pet has so that you can check with your insurance company to see if you are covered.

Referral

In complex cases, your veterinary surgeon may recommend referral to a specialist pet dentist.