

## Why Should Pet Owners Be Concerned About Dental Disease?

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**D**ental disease is the most commonly occurring disease in companion animals. Pet owners are often surprised to learn how dental disease can adversely affect their pet's health and quality of life. Oral diseases can, for example, cause significant pain and discomfort. The bacteria that grow inside of unhealthy mouths also can gain access to the bloodstream and spread to the rest of the body, including the heart valves, liver and kidneys. Rarely, pets may inhale dental debris, leading to a problem within the lungs. The bad breath caused by dental disease also can be disruptive to the bond between pets and people.

### What Exactly Is Dental Disease?

The most common symptoms of dental disease include:

- Tartar and calculus, which are deposits of minerals and debris that accumulate on teeth. They provide a substrate on which bacteria love to grow.
- Gingivitis, which refers to inflammation and infection of the gums that occurs secondarily to tartar and calculus. The gums become red and painful, recede away from teeth and may bleed.

• Periodontal disease is a term that describes destruction of the bones and ligaments that hold the teeth in place. Once it occurs, tartar and bacteria build up very quickly in the damaged areas. Periodontal disease can lead to tooth loss, bone loss and, in severe cases, even fractures of the jaw. Existing periodontal disease cannot be reversed, but its progression can be slowed and minimized with proper treatment. One severely affected tooth can spread disease to its neighbors, so preventative measures are very important.

While these are the most common symptoms, pets can experience many other oral problems, including, but not limited to: worn teeth, traumatic tooth injuries and abscesses, hyperplasia (overgrowth) of the gums, mouth ulcers, oral cancers and inflammatory conditions.

### What Are the Signs?

One of the earliest and most common signs of dental disease is halitosis, or bad breath. Some pets may demonstrate difficulty playing with toys or chewing food, and they may become picky eaters or develop a preference for softer foods.



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However, often pets do not show obvious signs until the disease progresses, so it is important to have your pet's teeth checked at their wellness exams.

### Who Is At Risk?

All dogs and cats are at risk of developing dental disease, but some breeds tend to experience disease with greater frequency and severity. This mainly includes small-breed dogs and breeds with short snouts, such as pugs or Persian cats. These breeds have smaller mouths, leading to crowding of the teeth and tight pockets that promote quick accumulation of tartar and calculus. Any pets with retained deciduous (baby) teeth are also at risk.

Large-breed dogs are prone to fractures or wearing of the teeth, due to their tendencies to chew on sticks and toys.

### Dental Cleanings

Most dogs and cats will require medical dental cleanings by their veterinarian.

*While all dogs and cats are susceptible to dental disease, small-breed dogs and pets with short snouts, like Pugs and Persian cats, tend to experience more severe and frequent oral issues. At left, Photos©BigStockPhoto.com/ Eric Isseleé;*



While home dental care can greatly reduce the severity of dental disease, unfortunately it is not possible to completely prevent tartar accumulation, just as with humans, who brush and floss every day, but still need regular cleanings with a dentist.

Dental cleanings provide the additional benefit of allowing your veterinarian to perform a thorough oral examination, which may help with the early detection of diseases such as resorptive lesions (a painful condition in which the body dissolves certain tooth roots) or oral cancers. Severely infected teeth may be removed to alleviate pain and protect neighboring teeth.

### **How Can I Help Keep My Pet's Mouth Healthy?**

The gold standard in maintaining good oral health is to brush your pet's teeth. There also are many dental diets, as well as chews and treats that are available to help clean the teeth as they are chewed. Some pets may benefit from an antiseptic rinse, which helps to slow down the growth of bacteria.

Be sure to talk to your veterinarian, who will help you select the best combination of home dental care options, based on your pet's individual needs. 🍄

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