

Caring for Your Dog's Teeth



We all know how important good dental hygiene is for our own health, but many dog owners are unaware that this is true for their pets too. Dental disease is one of the most common preventable illnesses in pets, affecting more than 75% of dogs and cats over three years of age. Infections of the teeth and gums can cause pain, loose teeth, and damage to internal organs like the kidneys and heart. All of this can be avoided by practicing proper dental care techniques.

Dental Disease in Dogs The term dental disease includes a variety of ailments. The most common of these is periodontitis. Plaque, a soft mixture of bacteria, food, and saliva accumulates on your dogs teeth, especially near the gums. The plaque hardens to become tartar. The plaque and tartar irritate the tissues around the tooth and its root. This starts out as gingivitis (reddened gums). Infections and abscesses develop around the tooth, resulting in bad breath, bleeding, pain, and tooth loss. Infected, bleeding gums allow bacteria to enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body, damaging the kidneys and heart.

Injuries of the teeth and gums, such as broken teeth, are also common in dogs. This is especially true of dogs that chew on hard objects, such as rocks, cow hooves, bones, and fences. Injured or bleeding teeth require immediate veterinary care.

Dental Examinations Each time your dog has a routine physical examination, your veterinarian will check his teeth and gums. He is looking for buildup of plaque or tartar, reddened gums (gingivitis), bleeding, broken teeth, and other problems. Your dog should receive a dental exam at least once or twice a year. If you notice problems like breath odor, drooling, or difficulty eating, he should be examined right away. The sooner that dental disease is identified and treated, the better the outcome.

Tooth Brushing Teaching your dog to accept daily dental care is surprisingly easy. The key is to start slowly and make the experience as pleasant as possible. Place a small amount of the liquid from a can of water-packed tuna on your finger and allow him to lick it off. Repeat, this time holding his mouth closed and stroking the outside surfaces of his teeth lightly.

Eventually, over a period of one or more weeks, you can substitute a piece of gauze, a finger toothbrush, or a small, soft toothbrush instead of your finger. Remember, unless your veterinarian directs you otherwise, you only need to clean the outside tooth surfaces. This reduces the chance of a painful bite! Once your dog comfortably accepts the brushing process, you can introduce toothpastes designed for pets in place of the tuna water.

The most important aspect of tooth brushing is the mechanical action, but toothpastes can add helpful ingredients like fluoride, enzymes that help break down plaque, and antiseptics that prevent bacterial growth. They are flavored to please your dogs palate too. Never use toothpaste designed for humans the ingredients may irritate your dogs mouth and cause an upset stomach.

Plaque begins to develop within hours after brushing. Within about three days, plaque is converted into tartar. Therefore, daily brushing is recommended. Less frequent brushing is still beneficial, but may allow the gradual development of periodontitis. A daily brushing routine not only keeps your pets mouth healthy but also keeps his breath smelling fresh.

Professional Care Most dogs require professional dental cleanings and periodontal care periodically. If your veterinarian detects signs of gingivitis or tartar accumulation during the dental exam, he will recommend a professional cleaning in order to halt the progress of periodontal disease.

Your dog will receive anesthesia for the dental cleaning. All surfaces of the tooth will be carefully cleaned, even below the gum line. The teeth will be polished to discourage deposition of new plaque. Fluoride or other preventive treatments may be applied. Because your dog is asleep, his mouth can be inspected carefully for signs of additional problems. The professional cleaning is the only way to stop the progress of periodontal disease once tartar has formed.

Treats, Chews, and Other Products A variety of products are marketed to help keep your dogs teeth clean at home. These include dental care diets, plaque reducing treats and toys, and solutions that are applied to dogs mouth. Check with your veterinarian before using these products, because some may be unsafe or may interfere with other treatments your dog is receiving. In general, avoid very hard chews such as natural bone or cow hooves. Also, remember that although treats and chews may be of some benefit, there is no substitute for daily tooth brushing.