

Could My Cat/Dog Have Periodontal Disease?

Teeth are anchored in periodontal tissues consisting of gingiva (gums), ligaments, cementum, and supporting bone.

More than 85 percent of cats and dogs older than 4 years have periodontal disease.

Periodontal disease starts with the formation of plaque, a transparent adhesive fluid composed of bacteria. *Plaque starts forming within twelve hours after a thorough dental cleaning.* When plaque is not removed, mineral salts in saliva hasten the formation of hard calculus. Calculus, covered with bacteria, is irritating to the gingival tissue. *By-products of bacteria “eat any” tooth support structure - causing pain and periodontal disease.*

The **mobility index** evaluates tooth movement within the socket.

Class 1 - the tooth moves only slightly.

Class 2 - the tooth movement is less than the distance of the crown width.

Class 3 - occurs when there is movement greater than a crown width. *Class three reflects severe periodontal disease* in which the teeth have lost more than 50 percent of their support and usually need extraction.

Periodontal disease can also be graded from stages one to four. The first two stages are classified as gingivitis; the last two as periodontitis.

Stage 1: plaque extends to the gum line, causing inflammation to the gingiva.

Stage 2: gingivitis is marked by inflammation and swelling. Thorough teeth cleaning under anesthesia, followed by home care, can usually reverse gingivitis. If treated early, the gingiva can return to normal appearance and function. If untreated, periodontitis can result.

Stage 3: periodontal disease occurs when there is bone loss in addition to gingival inflammation and infection.

Stage 4: periodontal disease, there is progression of bone loss, usually creating tooth mobility.

Once bone loss from periodontal disease has occurred, more involved therapy is needed in addition to a teeth-cleaning. What factors are considered before periodontal surgery? (a) a cooperative patient, (b) a readable tooth and (c) a choice of which periodontal procedure to use.

The owner of a cat or dog with periodontal disease needs to be committed to saving the animal's teeth. This commitment includes daily brushing to remove plaque. Frequent veterinary dental examinations are also required, and expense should be considered.

The patient must also be a willing partner. If a cat or dog will not allow home care, the best dental surgeon and most caring owner will not make a difference. **Unless there is strong owner commitment and patient compliance, it is wise to extract a tooth rather than letting the pet suffer.**

Choosing appropriate teeth to operate on is equally important. **Every dental procedure by a veterinarian should include probing and charting.** The periodontal probe is an important instrument used to evaluate periodontal health. A probe is marked in millimeter gradations. It is gently inserted in the space between the gingival margin and tooth. The probe will stop where gingiva attaches to the tooth or at the bottom of the pocket if the attachment is gone. Cats without periodontal disease should have less than 1mm probing depth, dogs having less than 2mm. Each tooth must be probed on four sides. Probing depths of all teeth are noted on the pet's medical record and a treatment plan formatted.

Pocket depths up to 5mm in both cats and dogs can usually be cleaned adequately with hand instruments and ultrasonic/piezoelectric technology. Depths greater than 5mm need surgical care to clean the tooth surfaces or to extract the tooth.

Intraoral radiographs supply essential information for deciding which tooth will benefit from surgery. Radiographs help when evaluating supportive bone around the teeth. As a rule, **if there is greater than 50 percent bone loss around a tooth, only advanced surgical procedures may provide long-term success.**

Once the veterinarian is convinced she is working on a cooperative patient and a tooth that can benefit from care, the appropriate type of periodontal surgery is chosen. An ideal method allows exposure of the root surface for cleaning, preserves attached gingiva to be reconnected in a fashion that eliminates the periodontal pocket.

How can I tell if my pet is suffering from periodontal disease?

The leading sign is bad breath. Cats and dogs should not have a disagreeable mouth odor. **Bad breath comes from infection.** If your pet's breath does not smell like roses, let us examine their mouth and advise care.

What types of tests are done to diagnose dental disease?

If periodontal disease is present, or if your pet has a fractured tooth, an oral exam is performed while your pet is under anesthesia. A periodontal probe is used to evaluate bone loss around each tooth. **Radiographs are taken to evaluate if teeth can be saved or need to be extracted.**

When do I have to start worrying about dental problems with my pet?

As soon as puppy or kitten teeth emerge, it's time to start brushing. Although baby teeth are replaced with adult teeth, the puppy or kitten gets used the brushing procedure, which continues for life.

What can be done if my pet has periodontal disease?

Periodontal disease occurs when tooth support structures are affected by infection. In the beginning stages, cleaning above and below the gum line as well as removal of the calculus attached to the tooth will help restore periodontal health. In advanced cases, either periodontal surgery or extractions are performed. Antibiotics are also given to help control the progression of periodontal disease.

What toys should I avoid to protect my dog's teeth?

Chewing on objects harder than the tooth may lead to dental fractures. Be especially careful with **cow and horse hooves** - they commonly cause fractures to the upper cheek tooth. **Do not play tug-of-war games**, especially with young dogs and cats, because they can move growing teeth to abnormal locations. Throwing **hard frisbees** can also cause trauma to the teeth resulting in pulpitis (an inflammation of the pulp).

What are cat cavities? Many cats get painful lesions at the gum lines that invade the teeth. These lesions are referred to as feline odontoclastic resorptive lesions (FORLs).

Unfortunately, we do not know what causes FORLs, and the most effective treatment involves extraction of the affected tooth. Check to see if your cat has FORLs by placing a cotton-tipped application to the gum-line and pressing. If there is a painful lesion, your cat will chatter his/her jaw - this must be treated.

Which animals are most at risk for periodontal disease?

Smaller breeds are more prone than larger because the teeth are closer together - these dogs also usually live longer. Terriers, Maltese and Shih Tzus are especially prone to periodontal disease.

What can you do to fix a broken tooth? If your cat or dog breaks a tooth, there are two treatments; root canal therapy to save the tooth or extraction. **Leaving the tooth alone with an exposed nerve is not a humane option. In addition to pain, infection will develop, which can spread to vital organs.**