

What to Expect If Your Pet Needs Dental Care

Root canals, dental radiographs, orthodontics, crowns, caps, implants and periodontal surgery for pets? You must be kidding! We're not! Dental procedures are routinely performed in veterinary practices. **How does a pet owner know if dental care is needed and where can a pet owner go for advanced dental care?**

Examination is the key to diagnosing and determining the type of treatment needed. You need to know what to look for. You can help by examining your pet's teeth and oral cavity monthly. First, smell the breath. *If you note a disagreeable odor, gum disease may be present.* **Periodontal disease is the most common ailment of small animals.** Gum problems begin with bacteria accumulation at the gum line around the tooth. **Unless brushed away daily, bacteria will destroy tooth-supporting bone, causing bleeding, and, if untreated, result in tooth loss.** Usually the first sign is bad breath. Other signs are red swollen gums, tartar (a yellow or brown accumulation on the tooth surface) and loose teeth.

When examining your pet's mouth, look for chips or fractures on the surface of their teeth. Contrary to their popularity, **cow hooves, bones or other hard materials chewed on by pets may break teeth.** Often, small pieces of enamel are chipped off, which causes no harm. **Deeper chips into the dentin layer may cause sensitivity to your pet if not treated.** If a fracture is deeper, you may notice a red, brown or black spot in the middle of the tooth surface. This spot is the pulp (made up of the tooth's nerve and blood vessels), which is now open to oral cavity bacteria.

When your exam reveals dental problems, a trip to the veterinarian is in order. The veterinary oral exam will begin with visual examination of the face, mouth and each tooth. Frequently, a pet's mouth has multiple problems that need care.

A detailed exam follows. Cats and dogs cannot point to dental abnormalities with their paws. In order to determine the proper treatment plan, other tests are necessary. **Sedation and anesthesia are essential to adequately evaluate oral conditions.** Anesthesia allows the veterinarian to examine each tooth individually and thoroughly.

Expect your veterinarian or dental assistant to use a periodontal probe to measure gum pocket depths around each tooth. 0.5mm of probe depth normally exists around each tooth in a cat and 1mm or 2mm in a dog. When cats and dogs are affected by periodontal disease, depths increase, creating periodontal pockets. When the probe depth in cats and dogs is greater than 5mm, periodontal disease is present - requiring additional care to save the tooth. **Unfortunately, by the time some pets are presented for dental care, it is too late to save the tooth/teeth. Preventative care and periodic checkups help decrease the loss of additional teeth.**

Radiographs show the inside of the tooth and root. Veterinarians use the same dental radiograph units that are used for humans. **Many decisions are based on radiograph findings.** Usually, the veterinarian will visually examine the mouth, note any problems, take radiographs while the cat/dog is under anesthesia and then recommend what is needed for the procedure.

If your cat or dog needs advanced dental care, where can it be found? Many veterinarians have taken postgraduate dental training in order to better serve their patients. There are veterinarians who have passed advanced written and practical examinations given by the American Veterinary Medical Association, which certifies them as dental specialists. Veterinary dental specialists can consult with your veterinarian or see your cat or dog directly.

Cats and dogs do not have to suffer the pain and discomfort of untreated broken or loose teeth and infected gums. With the help of thorough examinations, radiographs, dental care and daily brushing, your pet can keep his/her teeth in their mouth - where they should be!