

# Dental health

By Ingrid King

**D**ental disease is the most frequently diagnosed health problem for pets. Dogs and cats are particularly prone to tooth and gum diseases. An astounding 80 percent of dogs and 70 percent of cats show signs of oral disease by age 3, according to the American Veterinary Dental Society.

Normal teeth in both cats and dogs should be white or just a little yellow. Gums should be light pink and smooth (except in breeds with pigmented gums).

Oral disease begins with a build up of plaque and tartar in your pet's mouth. Without proper preventive and therapeutic care, plaque and tartar build-up leads to periodontal disease, which manifests in red and/or swollen and tender gums, bad breath, and bleeding. When the gums are swollen, they can be painful – a good rule of thumb is that if it looks like it might be painful, it probably is. Pets are masters at masking pain – when in doubt, assume that your pet is experiencing at least some discomfort.

The inflammation and infection associated with periodontal disease can lead to damage to other organs such as the heart, kidney and liver, and lead to other serious health problems. Dental disease can also be an indicator of immune system disorders, particularly in cats.

Common indicators of oral disease in dogs include bad breath, a change in eating or chewing habits, pawing at the face or mouth and depression. If you notice any of these, don't wait until your dog's next annual check up; take him to the veterinarian for a thorough exam.

Cats rarely show any symptoms at all unless the situation is literally life threatening. They will eat even when their level of chronic mouth pain would send a person to the emergency room. They almost never paw at their face, even with loose or abscessed teeth. They get pretty smelly breath from eating cat food, so it's tough to tell by smelling the breath whether your cat has dental disease or just had breakfast. But even though they don't show us much in the way of outward symptoms, chronic dental/periodontal disease can cause severe and often irreversible damage to internal organs. So it's important to get regular veterinary exams at least once a year, and twice a year for cats six and older or for cats with a known history of dental problems.

Since our pets won't just sit still and open their mouths to have their teeth cleaned like humans, dental procedures for pets require general anaesthesia – something that makes many pet owners nervous. While there are always risks with anaesthesia, they can be minimized with a thorough pre-aesthetic check up, including blood work to assess kidney and liver function and rule out other underlying health issues. This will allow your veterinarian to customize the anaesthesia to your pet's health status and potential special needs. Keep in mind that leaving dental disease untreated may present a far greater risk than anaesthesia.



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