

Caring For Your Pet's Teeth

Periodontal disease is the most common disease of humans and pets and can lead to more severe disease such as pyelonephritis (infection of the kidneys) or valvular endocarditis (infection of the heart valves). Perfectly healthy teeth have no plaque, no tartar, no gingivitis, and no enamel problems such as cavities or resorptive lesions. Unfortunately this level of perfection can rarely be maintained throughout life. The good news is that there are several things pet owners and veterinarians can do to considerably slow the onset of these problems.

Periodontal disease begins with the accumulation of plaque on the surface of the tooth and ends with loss or death of the tooth. Dental plaque is a mixed colony of bacteria in a matrix of bacterial and salivary polymers, epithelial cell remnants, and white blood cells. In four to five days the plaque begins to mineralize into dental calculus, also known as tartar, which is rock-hard and tightly adhered to the enamel surface of the tooth. Dental calculus is recognized by its yellow-brown color. Calculus harbors massive numbers of bacteria and their waste products which are largely responsible for "bad breath." Calculus and bacteria are very irritating to the adjacent gum tissue which results in gingivitis (inflammation of the gums adjacent to the teeth) and periodontitis (inflammation of all the tissues surrounding the tooth). Gingivitis and periodontitis result in periodontal pocket formation, receding gum lines, root exposure, and loss or death of the tooth.

We can combat periodontal disease on several fronts: brushing, dental treats, special diets, oral rinses, and professional dental cleaning. Brushing is your first and best defense against periodontal disease. The goal of brushing is to remove as much plaque as possible before it mineralizes into calculus. Products such as Greenies® by S&M NuTec (available at Westwood Animal Hospital) or Chew-eez® by Alpo, help minimize plaque accumulation by up to thirty-five percent. Oral rinses have antibacterial effects and are used to flush debris from teeth. Professional dental cleaning removes plaque and calculus and identifies specific dental problems. Periodontal treatment can be done with medication or, in advanced cases, oral surgery. Gingivitis and periodontitis can be temporarily reversed by professional cleaning and specific therapy. Regular brushing delays the onset of gingivitis and periodontitis.

Brushing should be done daily for optimal results. The mechanical action of the brush does most of the plaque removal. Pet toothpaste can soften the plaque matrix and help reduce the bacterial counts in your pet's mouth leading to better breath. Flavored pet toothpaste can make brushing more enjoyable for your pet. Human toothpaste is not intended to be swallowed and should not be used as it may cause stomach upset. To introduce a toothbrush to your pet consider the following technique: start by indirectly massaging your pet's teeth with your fingers on the outside of their cheeks. When this is tolerated, move your fingers to the inside of their cheeks and massage the teeth directly or wrap a gauze square around your finger. Once your pet is accustomed to this, slip on a finger brush and focus on brushing the outer surfaces of all teeth using a circular motion. When your pet is comfortable with the finger brush, if you want, you can introduce a soft-bristled tooth brush (human or pet design). Try to make this a fun time for your pet by petting and talking gently to them and offering a treat afterwards. Your reward is a healthier pet with cleaner teeth and better breath.

[American Veterinary Dental Society](http://avds-online.org) avds-online.org

[Veterinary Oral Health Council](http://vohc.org) vohc.org