

# Pawsitive Press

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## The Importance of Dental Health By: Dr. Patrick Hafner

When we talk about dental and oral health in our furry companions we are talking about a topic that is critical to the overall health and longevity of our pets. There are many things we can do on a preventive basis for our pets. However, of all the things we do to keep our furry friends healthy, I believe oral health is the most important. Oral healthcare as part of an overall program of preventive health maintenance is one of the easiest to maintain. However, it is also one of the easiest to ignore. Pets seldom let owners know that there are issues in the mouth that are causing pain and discomfort and ongoing inflammation. Dogs and cats do an excellent job of being stoic and acclimating to their pain as it progresses. Rarely do pet owners lift the lips of their pet to examine what may be “growing” in their mouths. If you don’t see “pearly whites next to healthy gums there is trouble brewing.

The biggest sign of



dental disease that is noticed by owners is bad breath. Bad breath always indicates that there is a problem with the mouth. The problem may be easily rectified by regular brushing or may need extensive dental work to correct the problem. Only by careful physical examination of the mouth can proper advice be given as to what needs to be done to restore optimal oral health.



The proper continual maintenance of oral health centers on bacterial growth. Uncontrolled overgrowth of bacteria with the help of food and saliva creates a nasty environment that creates major inflammation. The mouth can grow just about anything and from what I see every day in practice

this is absolutely true. The mouth always has bacteria in it. It was built that way. However, nature intended there to be a population of bacteria that live in harmony, health, and balance. When plaque and tartar accumulate on the tooth surfaces this harmonious bacterial balance becomes unbalanced and new “bad” bacteria and other “bugs” begin to thrive and create inflammation in the gum tissues. As time goes on, without regular cleaning, deep pockets of infection and pus invade the gums deeper and deeper. This bacterial invasion causes the normal attachments to the tooth to become weakened. This weakness over time causes the tooth to actually rot out of the mouth if not treated appropriately. This process is called periodontal disease and is similar to what happens to people who suffer from gum disease. When people have deep pockets of infection and inflammation in their mouths they are referred to periodontists for gum management and most of the time that will require surgery.

Tooth loss is not the only thing that happens in

## **Dental Health Cont'd**

the inflamed and infected mouth of our pets. Their gums will bleed just like people's gums when the mouth is not healthy. Any gum tissue that bleeds with minor abrasion with a Q-tip indicates infection and inflammation in the mouth. Pet's gums bleed when they eat if they have infection and pockets in the gum tissue. You won't generally see this as the amount of bleeding because it doesn't bleed that much. However, when gums bleed the bacteria can enter the blood stream. The body must then control this infection by activation of the white blood cells. Activation of the immune system is an inflammatory response with many by-products that have effects on the health of the entire body. Bacteria may also find themselves trapped in organs or tissues where again another inflammatory process occurs. The body can wall off this bacteria in organs or tissues but this causes minute scar tissue to be created. Over years this takes its toll on organs and tissues decreasing their normal function. So, when pets age this continual inflammatory process with organ and tissue devitalization leads to early organ dysfunction and loss of quality of life. In the past, we believed that organs just become less functional with age and believed there was little to do to slow this normal process down. This is why I believe that maintenance of oral health is the most important preventive measure we can take for our pets. A properly maintained mouth throughout the life of our

pets can certainly increase the quality of life and longevity.

In humans, we now know that a poorly cared for mouth can set a person up for a heart attack or stroke by the bacteria creating inflammatory by-products that increase the blood's coagulation leading to clots for strokes and heart attacks. One of my good friends in human cardiology described a 50 yr. old gentleman with a horrible infection of his heart valves that occurred 1 month after a tooth cleaning that he had not done for 20 yrs. Bacteria from this major infection in the mouth found its way to the heart and almost destroyed it.



### **How often should by my pet's mouth be examined?**

Every time you come to see me for any problem I will always include an oral examination. At a minimum, an annual examination is needed. If anesthesia wasn't required for proper cleaning I would do a thorough cleaning every 6 months just like in people.

### **Can you see everything you need to see by routine physical examination?**

The need for a dental cleaning can be easily determined by a routine physical examination but many dental issues require examination under anesthesia where dental x-rays can be taken and evaluated. Many times there

will be the need for correcting dental abnormalities that cannot be seen until a complete examination with x-rays can be completed.

### **How often will a dental cleaning under anesthesia be necessary?**

This depends on each individual pet. My own dog needed a dental cleaning every six to nine months. Most pets need a dental cleaning every year. Some pets go longer. This is why an examination of the mouth every time we see your pet is so important. This way we can catch problems early and get them corrected before they cause tooth loss via untreated gum disease.

### **What can an owner do to improve oral health?**

Brushing the teeth is the most effective way to reduce plaque, tartar and bacterial growth in the mouth. This must be done a minimum of twice weekly, however, I would not stop you from brushing once per week. The good news is you can't brush too often. We have several different products that you can use to help in the control of bacteria tartar and plaque. Brushing the teeth of our dogs and cats can be easy, difficult or impossible. If brushing is not something an owner can do then we can still maintain great oral health by regular examination and cleaning. My dog was impossible to brush however he only lost one tooth in 15 years of his life because as mentioned above I did his teeth every time they needed it. He was only sick once in his life that required any

medical treatment. He died of canine cognitive disorder which is the equivalent of doggie Alzheimer's which I could not have prevented anyway.



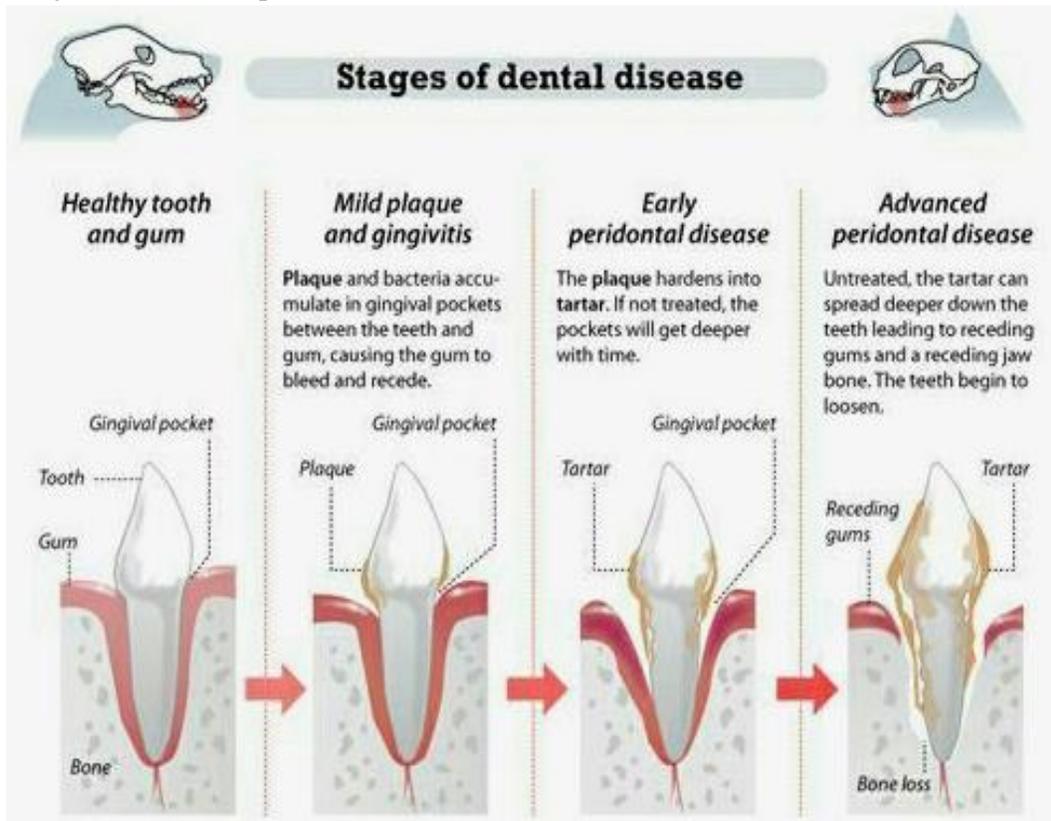
**What differences are there between dogs and cats with regard to dental issues?**

Good question and I'm glad you asked. Dogs and cats don't have cavities in the same sense as people. Dogs are prone to periodontal disease and tooth loss from this process. Cats are not prone to periodontal disease but frequently have a dental condition called feline odontoclastic resorptive lesions. This is a fancy name for a process that occurs at the enamel and gum line which causes erosive holes in the enamel of the teeth that eventually end up in the pulp cavity allowing bacteria direct access to the blood stream and then to organs and tissues. Bacteria, plaque, and tartar that accumulate on the teeth, especially at the gum line, are responsible for these unique cat dental lesions. These erosive lesions cause a great deal of pain. I can tell if the erosion I see on a physical exam has made its way to the pulp by tapping a Q-tip on the lesion and seeing if the lower jaw responds with a painful twitch. This is not noticeable to owners. Extraction is the only treatment for this condition.

**Isn't dental cleaning with anesthesia expensive?**

I believe that proper dental care that keeps a mouth healthy will more than pay for itself in rewards that are monetary in nature by reducing the need for the treatment of unnecessary aging conditions that are directly caused by a lifetime of needless inflammation. This question also makes me think of the Master card commercial. Dental cleaning \$300, quality and longevity of life....priceless!!

My advice to you is this. Look in your pet's mouth. If it looks "nasty" and those pearly whites are not pearly white with pink and healthy gums. Or if you smell an odor from your dog's mouth then come and see me because they need some help☺.



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**\*Patient must have been seen with in the last 12 months. This exam is limited to the mouth only, any other exam will incur an additional fee\*** Expires 2/28/18 NL