

A Dog Owner's Guide for Dental Care

Maintaining your dog's health is important. One important factor that is often overlooked is dental health. While just one part of a healthy body, dental care is vital. Serious problems with oral health can lead to infection of the nasal sinus and bone near the tooth and also to bacteria entering the blood stream, causing significant damage to tissues far away from the mouth, such as the heart, liver and kidneys. Damage to these tissues can lead to illness, added medical cost, loss of ability to reproduce, and may potentially be fatal.

Dental disease is caused by the buildup of bacterial plaque on the margin of the gums and the teeth. The most common symptom is tooth discoloration, usually noticed on teeth toward the back of the mouth. The presence of bacteria causes inflammation of the gums, or gingivitis, which can be seen as a reddening of the gums where they meet the teeth. The body will try to fight off the infection, but, if not corrected with quality teeth cleaning above and below the gum line, the infection will continue and the gums will start to die. This is noticeable as the gums begin to recede from the teeth, perhaps to the point of seeing the base of the tooth, or even the root in extreme cases.

Taking steps to keep your dog's teeth and gums in good health is in you and your dog's best interest.

Pro-active prevention strategies include:

- Feeding dry kibble
- Providing chew toys specifically designed to reduce tartar and plaque
- Using barrier sealants or gels to prevent plaque formation
- Tooth brushing
- Regular (every 6 to 12 months) veterinary dental examinations

Veterinary dental cleaning should be performed as necessary to remove plaque buildup, both above and below the gum line. Removal of what is visible in an awake dog is helpful, but may not effectively remove plaque below the gum line. A complete dental cleaning with the dog under anesthesia may be necessary to effectively remove all plaque and prevent continued destruction of the gums and underlying structures of the mouth. Providing good dental care will improve the quality of and perhaps even added years to the life of your dog.



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DENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT SCALE

A general way to evaluate the dental condition of a dog is to use a five-point scale:

Stage 0: No signs of plaque or tartar. Dental care by the owner is needed to maintain healthy teeth and gums. Products available will help make dental care by the owner easier.

Stage 1: Mild gingivitis: Reversible stage; the margin of the attached gum is inflamed and swollen. Plaque can be seen on the teeth. Dental care by the owner is needed. If no improvement with owner care, then professional veterinary dental cleaning may be needed to remove plaque buildup and prevent progression of dental disease.

Stage 2: Moderate gingivitis: Reversible stage; the entire gum is inflamed and swollen. The mouth is painful and odor is noticeable; tooth roots have lost up to 25% of their attachment. Bacteria begin to impact other body organs. Professional veterinary dental cleaning is needed within 2 months. Dental care by the owner is needed for future prevention.

Stage 3: Severe gingivitis: Potentially reversible stage; the gums are cherry red and bleeding, damaged by infection and calculus. A sore mouth and bad breath are evident. Heart valves and kidneys are exposed to bacteria and may be experiencing inflammation and damage. Professional veterinary dental cleaning is needed in 2 to 4 weeks, along with antibiotics and pain medications. Extractions are likely. Dental care by the owner will need to be discussed in detail.

Stage 4: End stage periodontal disease: Irreversible stage; chronic infection is destroying the gums, teeth, and bone. Many teeth are loose. Bacteria are spreading through the body. Heart, liver, and kidneys are compromised. Pain is constant. Professional veterinary dental cleaning is needed immediately. Extractions, antibiotics, and pain medications will be necessary. Dental care by the owner is needed for future prevention.