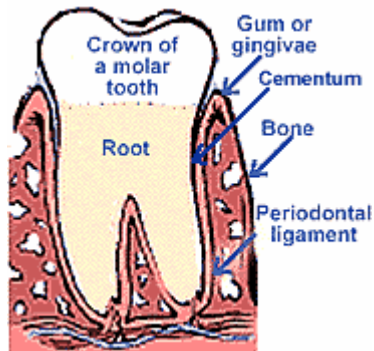


DENTAL DISEASE IN DOGS AND CATS

Dogs and cats teeth are similar in structure to those of a human, differing in number and shape but essentially being composed of incisors, canines, premolars and molars. Each tooth is held tightly in place by a ligament that runs between the tooth root and the surrounding bony pocket. The gingiva (the gum) is the soft pink or pigmented tissue encircling each tooth and joining with the inner lips and the insides of the upper and lower parts of the mouth.



Plaque can build up on your pet's teeth in the exact same manner that it forms on your own teeth. Plaque is essentially made up of food debris and millions of bacteria that adhere to the tooth surface. In the beginning, this build-up is a soft material that is easily scraped off, however if left to accumulate over a longer period it forms tartar, which is a hard coating that is more difficult to remove.



The picture on the left shows a dog with severe dental disease (note the thick tartar and the reddened gingiva). The picture on the right shows clean teeth after a full dental scale and polish.

Plaque and tartar tends to build up on the tooth from the gum line downwards, also forming in small cracks in the tooth surface. It looks unsightly and gives the teeth a discoloured appearance, also creating a foul odour (have you ever noticed that your dog or cat has stinky breath? Check its teeth!). These, however, are the least of your pet's problems. Tartar buildup on the gum line causes gingivitis (inflammation of the gingiva due to bacterial infection). The gingiva is normally a pale pink colour in health (although in some animals it can appear dark brown or black due to pigment), and it is normally smooth and moist to the touch. With gingivitis, gum lining the teeth takes on a darker red shade and can become quite swollen and sensitive to pressure, to a point where it may bleed easily, for example during eating or when knocked. Gingivitis in itself is not a serious disease, and over 80% of dogs and cats older than 3 years of age are found to suffer from some degree of gingivitis.

What starts as a minor problem, however, can occasionally go on to cause more serious disease. Prolonged gingivitis may result in receding gums; loosening of the tooth in its bony socket; loss of multiple teeth and formation of pus-filled abscesses associated with the tooth root. If bacteria manage to get in to the blood stream, the affected animal may die suddenly from septicaemia (infection of the blood). If the animal doesn't develop septicaemia, bacteria may still travel via the blood to distant sites and set up infection there. In such cases, simple dental disease can lead to bacterial infections of the heart, brain, liver or kidneys, all of which carry a grave prognosis.

In order to avoid such serious complications later down the track, it is important to practice good oral hygiene measures from an early age. Feeding RAW chicken wings or chicken necks is often the easiest and cheapest way to prevent plaque and tartar building up. It is the motion of crunching down on little bones that physically scrapes the teeth and removes plaque. Introduce these in to your pet's diet from an early age and aim to feed a minimum of once to twice a week. If your pet does not like chicken, try commercially manufactured products such as "Greenies®" or "Dentabones®," or even rawhide strips which are available from pet stores. Some pets will allow their owners to use a toothbrush on their teeth – if this is the case with your pet, be sure to use toothpaste that is specifically produced for animals. Another alternative is to put your pet on to a diet that has been specifically formulated so as to reduce plaque and tartar build-up, for example "Hills® t/d" or "Royal Canin® Dental & Digest". These are available from your vet clinic and not from pet stores.

If your pet already has a large tartar build-up, these options will most likely be of little help and a visit to the vets may be in order to have a full dental clean, after which you can then start with the above preventative techniques.

If you have any concerns about your pet's dental health, you can contact the Animal Aid Veterinary Clinic on 9739 0500.