

What you need to know about your pet's mouth.

Your pet's teeth represent a sophisticated food-chewing machine.

Open your adult pet's mouth and take a look. You'll find approximately 42 permanent teeth in your dog and 30 in your cat. Their teeth are comprised of incisors for biting, canine teeth for tearing, premolars for grinding, and molars for rigorous chewing. Each type of tooth serves an essential function within your pet's overall process of breaking down food.

Yet, without proper care, your pet's teeth are destined to suffer from issues associated with oral disease. As with any piece of machinery, regular maintenance is necessary to ensure continued operation at a peak level.

According to the American Veterinary Dental Society (AVDS), 80 percent of dogs and cats show oral disease by age 3, making it one of the most common conditions afflicting our furry four legged companions. The buildup of bacteria in your pet's mouth causes more than just bad breath – it can also serve as a catalyst of dental conditions and diseases affecting organs such as the heart, liver, and kidneys.

How can you keep your pet's mouth and teeth healthy in the face of this startling statistic? Here's what you need to know about pet dental health.

Healthy Teeth Make a Healthy Pet

White, healthy teeth help form the foundation for any animal's overall strong bill of health. But similar to with humans, pets' teeth are prone to plaque buildup. When allowed to combine with saliva and residual food between the tooth and gum, plaque turns to tartar. If plaque and tartar are not removed routinely by your veterinarian, they may cause periodontal disease.

The most common disease afflicting small animals, periodontal disease is a bacterial infection of the mouth. Its stages of severity progress from plaque and mildly inflamed gums to established gingivitis (gum disease) and, ultimately, the onset of full-fledge periodontal disease, which can result in tooth loss.

Preventive dental care represents one of the most neglected pet health needs. Periodontal disease is painful, and it's up to us to take responsibility for our pets' care. If you think your pet may have periodontal disease, schedule an appointment to have us perform an oral exam.

How to Tell if Your Pet Has Dental Disease

While you may not have a veterinary degree, your sensory perceptions can provide a strong indication of whether your pet is suffering from periodontal disease. Halitosis – or bad breath – is the most common sign of oral disease, and buildup of yellow and brown tarter on the tooth surface serves as the most obvious visual clue.

Other signs of canine periodontal disease include:

- Loose teeth
- Gingivitis
- Drooling
- Lack of appetite
- Difficulty chewing
- Bleeding gums
- Pawing at the mouth

As a pet owner, you should monitor your pet for potential dental conditions. However, it's also important to realize that some periodontal disease may not be visible to even the most experienced observer. Consequently, a complete periodontal examination – including dental X-rays – may be necessary to uncover all types of oral disease.