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What is dental disease?

Dental disease is a broad term used to describe conditions that primarily affect the mouth and teeth. The most common form of dental disease, called periodontal disease, actually affects the structures supporting the teeth, starting with the gums.

What are the initial signs of dental disease?

The earliest sign of dental disease is often redness or bleeding in the gums, but often the most readily apparent sign for an owner is halitosis (smelly breath). Halitosis can have many causes, some of which might not be specifically oral. Common causes of halitosis, in addition to periodontal disease, include lip fold disease, abscess, cleft palate, tumours and foreign bodies (e.g. sticks). Halitosis is never normal and should not be overlooked as normal 'dog breath'. Other indicators of dental disease include loss of appetite, dropping and/or shying away from food, and sneezing or snorting following eating and drinking. You may also notice behavioural changes associated with the pain and discomfort caused by dental disease, such as face rubbing, pawing at the mouth or uncharacteristic aggression when you pet or play near your dog's head or mouth.



What causes dental disease?

As with humans, dental plaque is the primary cause of poor oral health in dogs. Plaque is a film on the teeth that evolves over time and is home to bacteria. These bacteria become more significant to health and the plaque becomes more organized and harder to remove in just a few days without brushing.

All dogs are likely to experience dental disease, and approximately 85% of dogs over 3 years of age show signs of periodontal disease. Some breeds with reduced jaw size are more likely to have problems with their gums, these include Boxers, Pugs and Pekingese. Labrador Retrievers have a higher prevalence of caries (cavities) than other breeds.

Is it serious?

All dental disease warrants further investigation by your vet. Some causes of dental disease are relatively mild, and some can be very serious. Being proactive with early disease is wise. Signs of illness in the mouth can also be indicators of illness elsewhere in the body. Disease of the gums (periodontal disease), if left untreated, will most often lead to tooth loss. Dental disease is often painful, but can usually be successfully managed and the risk of future problems minimized by early intervention and a sensible ongoing home hygiene plan.

How is dental disease managed?

Management will depend on the exact type and severity of dental disease. Most commonly, the first step is a complete oral assessment followed by a scale and polish. This always requires a general anaesthetic in animals. It is a very common procedure and does not carry significant risks for most dogs. More severe dental problems may require extraction or advanced procedures, such as



root canal therapy. Veterinary treatment is the start of an ongoing process, which is lifelong – as it is with humans. It relies on preventative measures at home to maintain results (see below).

Can dental disease be prevented?

Thankfully, the most common kinds of dental disease are preventable and respond very well to treatment, especially if spotted early. Regular check-ups are key, as your vet will be able to notice early signs of dental disease before it becomes a serious health issue. The most important method for preventing dental disease is daily tooth brushing with a specially formulated pet toothpaste. Introducing brushing into an adult dog's routine may seem daunting, but with a gentle introduction and a little training, it should not be an unpleasant experience for either of you. If you are unsure of how to brush your dog's teeth, ask your vet for instructions or a demonstration. Special diets, chews and toys are also available, and these can help to slow the build-up of plaque. Nevertheless, daily brushing remains the gold standard. Even with good preventive measures at home, most dogs will need a regular scale and polish, just as some people need to visit the dentist more regularly.

Are there any complications to look out for?

If your dog has undergone surgery, they will likely need a soft diet for a couple of weeks and it is wise to remove toys for the recovery period. If your dog is used to dry kibble, soaking this to soften it is better than switching to a wet food suddenly, as this could cause an upset stomach. Vomiting during the recovery process is rare and can compromise healing. If your dog is sick following surgery contact your vet for advice without delay.



Will my dog need medication?

If your dog requires surgery beyond a simple scale and polish (e.g. extraction), your vet will prescribe pain medication for use at home over a recovery period. It is unlikely that your dog will need medication long-term if healing is rapid and straightforward.

What are the long-term considerations?

Regular home hygiene is key to success. With the correct daily home care regimen and regular visits to the vet, most dogs will not suffer long-term effects. All dogs will require professional dental cleaning from time to time. The interval between professional cleaning depends on a number of factors, not least of which is the diligence of home hygiene.

Whom do I contact if I want to know more?

If you have any questions about the management of dental disease or concerns about your dog's health, contact your own vet. Practices have a dental protocol. They will know your dog's medical history and will be able to discuss your dog's health and care with you.



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