

Dental Disease in Dogs

I was unaware that dogs have dental problems. Is it common?

Dental disease is one of the most common medical conditions seen by veterinarians. Over 68% of all dogs over the age of three are estimated to have some form of periodontal or dental disease.

Few pets show signs of dental disease. It is up to the pet's family and veterinarian to uncover this hidden and often painful condition.



Are dental problems the same in pets and people?

No. In man, the most common problem is tooth decay, which, due to the loss of calcium from the enamel, results in painful, infected caries (also called cavities). In the dog, tooth decay represents less than 10% of all dental problems. The most common dental problems seen in dogs are caused by periodontal disease.

What is periodontal disease?

Periodontal disease is a term used to describe inflammation or infection of the tissues surrounding the tooth. Accumulation of tartar and calculus on the teeth causes gum recession around the base of the tooth. Infection soon follows and the gums recede further, exposing sensitive unprotected tooth root surfaces and the bony tooth sockets. Left untreated, the infection spreads deep into the tooth socket, destroying the bone. Ultimately, the tooth loosens and falls out.

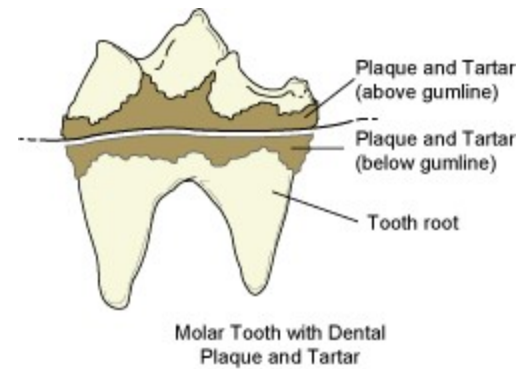
Is periodontal disease very common?

It is estimated that more than two-thirds of dogs over three years of age suffer from some degree of periodontitis, making it by far the most common disease affecting our pet dogs.

How does tartar form and why is it a problem?

The mouth is home to thousands of bacteria. As these bacteria multiply on the surfaces of the tooth, they form an invisible layer called *plaque* or *biofilm*. Some of this plaque is removed naturally by the dog's tongue and chewing habits. If allowed to remain on the tooth surface, the plaque thickens and becomes mineralized. Mineralized plaque forms tartar and as the tartar thickens further it becomes calculus. The tartar accumulates above and below the gumline and presses on the gums, causing inflammation called *gingivitis*.

As the oral infection progresses, tonsillitis and pharyngitis can also occur. The bacteria can also be absorbed into the blood stream and be carried to other organs. "Bad teeth" can cause infections in the heart valves (*endocarditis*), kidneys and/or liver.



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Can tartar be prevented?

Plaque becomes mineralized in some dogs much quicker than in others.

The best way to prevent tartar build-up is regular home care, particularly tooth brushing using toothpaste that is specifically designed to be swallowed. Special dog chew toys and treats may help reduce or delay tartar build-up. Some pet foods have been specifically formulated as dental diets that mechanically assist in plaque removal.

Will feeding dry food remove tartar?

Pet food manufacturers have recently developed new dental diets that can help reduce the formation of plaque and tartar in your pet. **Once tartar has formed, it will be necessary to remove it by professional scaling and polishing under general anesthesia.**

What is involved with a routine dental cleaning?

A routine dental cleaning involves a thorough dental examination, followed by a dental scaling and polishing to remove the tartar and invisible plaque from all of the tooth surfaces. Your veterinarian will perform pre-anesthetic blood tests to ensure that kidney and liver function are satisfactory for anesthesia. Sometimes antibiotic treatment is started before the periodontal therapy is performed. Your veterinarian will discuss the specific pre-dental recommendations for your pet.



Once your dog is anesthetized, your veterinarian will thoroughly examine the mouth, noting the alignment of the teeth and the extent of tartar accumulation both above and below the gumline. If periodontal disease is severe, it may not be possible to save badly affected teeth, which may need to be extracted. Next, tooth scaling will be performed using both traditional hand scalers and ultrasonic cleaning equipment to remove all traces of tartar, both above and below the gum line. The tartar below the gum line causes the most significant gum recession and it is

extremely important that it is removed thoroughly. After scaling, the teeth are polished to remove microscopic scratches in order to help prevent subsequent plaque build-up. Special applications such as fluoride, antibiotic preparations and cleaning compounds may be indicated to decrease tooth sensitivity, strengthen enamel, treat bacterial infection and reduce future plaque accumulation.

The procedures that your pet may require will be discussed with you before your pet's dental cleaning. Since it can be difficult to predict the extent of dental disease in advance of the procedure, it is imperative that your veterinarian is able to reach you during the procedure to discuss any additional treatment that may be necessary.

Why can't I just remove the tartar and plaque with a dental scaler?

Although you can remove the tartar that has accumulated above the gumline in some dogs that are extremely co-operative, there are three problems with doing this. First, only the tartar above the gumline is removed, leaving behind the material below the gumline, which will continue to cause periodontal problems. Second, it is not possible or safe to clean the inner surfaces of the teeth properly in a conscious dog. Third, the use of any instrument on the tooth enamel will cause microscopic scratches on the surface, ultimately damaging the tooth surface and leading to further disease. (This is the reason why your dental hygienist always polishes your teeth after removing the tartar with dental instruments).

Do I have to make an appointment for my dog to have a dental scaling and polishing?

Yes. Your veterinarian will perform pre-anesthetic blood tests, examine your pet for any other underlying disorders prior to the procedure, and determine if antibiotic treatment should be started in advance.

How can I prevent tartar accumulation after the procedure?

Plaque and tartar begin forming in as little as six hours after your pet's dental cleaning. A home dental care program including regular tooth brushing is a must for all pets. Your veterinarian will provide you with detailed instructions on how to brush or rinse your pet's teeth.



Can I use human toothpaste?

Human dentifrice or toothpaste should never be used in dogs. These foaming products contain ingredients that are not intended to be swallowed and that could cause internal problems. Numerous pet toothpastes that are non-foaming and safe to be swallowed are available in flavors that are appealing to dogs.