

# Don't Dismiss These Five Signs of Pain from Your Pet

Your pet can't tell you she's in pain, so you may remain blissfully unaware of her trouble. What's more, they hide pain so as not to appear vulnerable to predators. So if your pet shows any of these five signs, don't shrug it off without further investigation.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The majority of dogs and cats over the age of three have periodontal disease, which means that many pet guardians aren't paying enough attention to their animal companion's oral health
- Pets hide pain, including severe dental pain, which is an important reason for taking care of and monitoring your dog's or cat's oral health
- Some of the signs of dental pain in pets include stinky breath, behavior changes, and bleeding
- Plaque and tartar buildup on teeth can lead to irreversible gum disease, which can affect your pet's overall health, including his heart health
- Feeding a raw diet, offering appropriate raw bones, and brushing your pet's teeth regularly are the best methods for keeping your dog's or cat's teeth and gums in good condition

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Though many pet guardians have developed the excellent habit of regularly brushing their animal companion's teeth and monitoring their oral health, unfortunately, many more have not. We know this because the vast majority of dogs and cats over the age of three have gum disease.

If your pet has a sore mouth, she can't tell you about it. In addition, it's the nature of both dogs and cats to hide pain so they don't appear vulnerable to predators. This means your pet might really be hurting from dental disease while you remain blissfully unaware there's something wrong.

## Top Five Signs of Dental Pain in Pets

According to dvm360, there are five primary signs of dental pain in pets:<sup>1</sup>

1. **No signs at all** — Dogs, cats, and other companion animals rarely show signs of dental pain. This is a survival mechanism, an instinctual behavior that our domesticated animals have in common with their wild ancestors.
2. **Bad breath** — The odor is a byproduct of the bacterial metabolic process. In pets with periodontal disease, there is more bacteria in the mouth, and so the odor increases. "Doggy breath" or "tuna breath" is not normal and needs to be evaluated.

3. **Altered behavior** — Chewing on one side of the mouth, dropping food, running away from the food dish, crying when yawning, hiding, not grooming themselves, and acting "grumpy" are all signs of dental pain. You know your pet better than anyone, so look for abnormal behaviors.
4. **Bleeding** — Bleeding from the mouth is usually due to periodontal disease, but it could also be evidence of fractured teeth, lacerations, or ulcers on the tongue or gum tissue or the presence of an oral mass.

Look for thick, ropery saliva, spots of blood found on toys or beds, or drops of blood in the water or food dish. If the periodontal disease is severe enough, you may notice bleeding from the nose or bloody discharge when your pet sneezes.

5. **Return to normal** — Once your veterinarian addresses your pet's oral issues, your pooch may show he's feeling better by acting like a puppy again or your kitty might seek extra attention.

In addition, if you can see red, inflamed gums in your pet's mouth, or teeth with an obvious buildup of brown or greenish plaque and tartar, you can assume that if your dog or cat isn't already in pain, he will be soon without intervention.

## How the Plaque on Your Pet's Teeth Can Cause Irreversible Gum Disease

When plaque is allowed to build up on your dog's or cat's teeth, within a few days it hardens into tartar. Tartar adheres to the teeth and irritates the gums. Irritated gums result in an inflammatory condition called gingivitis. Pets with gingivitis have red rather than pink gums, and they often also have stinky breath.

If the tartar isn't removed from your pet's teeth, it builds up under the gums, eventually causing them to pull away from the teeth. This creates small pockets in the gum tissue that trap additional bacteria in the mouth.

At this stage, your pet has developed an irreversible condition called periodontal disease, which not only causes considerable pain, but can also result in abscesses, infections, loose teeth, and bone loss.

How quickly this process takes place in your pet's mouth depends on a number of factors, including her age, overall health, diet, breed, genetics, and the frequency and quality of dental care she receives.

## Poor Oral Health Is Linked to Heart Disease in Pets

Studies have proved a conclusive link between gum disease and heart disease in humans and dogs (studies on cats are sparse, but it's reasonable to assume a similar link exists for felines).

When your pet develops periodontal disease, the surface of his gums is weakened. The breakdown of gum tissue allows mouth bacteria to invade your pet's bloodstream and travel throughout his body. If his immune system doesn't kill off the circulating bacteria, it can reach the heart and infect it.

Studies have shown that oral bacteria, once launched into the bloodstream, seem able to fight off attacks by the immune system.

A Purdue University study points to a strong correlation in canines between gum degeneration and endocarditis, which is an inflammatory condition (infection) of the valves or inner lining of the heart.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers also suspect certain strains of oral bacteria may lead to heart problems. Some types of bacteria found in the mouths of dogs produce sticky proteins that can adhere to artery walls, causing them to thicken. Mouth bacteria are also known to promote the formation of blood clots that can damage the heart.

## **Here's an Excellent Way to Control Tartar Buildup on Your Pet's Teeth**

Your pet's diet plays a significant role in the amount of tartar she collects on her teeth.

Raw diets — even prepared, ground raw diets — help control tartar. Raw ground bone is a gentle dental abrasive that acts like fine sandpaper when chewed, which helps remove debris stuck on teeth. The meat contains natural enzymes, and in addition, raw food doesn't stick to teeth, unlike starchy kibble.

And speaking of kibble — it's a complete myth that dry pet food helps to keep your pet's teeth clean. Kibble is no better for your pet's teeth than crunchy human food is for your teeth. Do you eat granola or peanut brittle in lieu of brushing and flossing? Of course you don't! The idea that dry food keeps your pet's teeth clean is just as silly!

For dogs and cats, chewing plays an important role in removing plaque and tartar from teeth. Even though there are plenty of toys and food products on the market that can be of some help (providing your pet will chew them), raw bones are really the best option, and few dogs will turn them down.

It's important the bones are raw, because cooked bones can splinter and do serious damage to your pet's GI tract. The size depends on the size of your pet and whether she's such an eager chewer that she risks injuring herself or even breaking teeth. Your dog should always be supervised when she's working on a bone to minimize the risk of choking or tooth damage, and raw bones should be refrigerated between chewing sessions.

## **Daily Tooth Brushing Is the Best Way to Insure Your Pet's Oral Health**

With a gentle hand, patience, and persistence, most pet guardians can teach their dog or cat to submit to daily tooth brushing, which is the ideal way to insure tartar doesn't form on your pet's teeth.

One of the secrets to successful tooth brushing is to progress slowly and gently, allowing your pet to adapt at his own pace. Start with your finger rather than a toothbrush. Gently rub the top front teeth and all the way to the back teeth. Then do the same on the lower teeth. Praise your pet often and keep the sessions short.

Once your pet is relatively comfortable with your finger in his mouth, wrap a very thin damp cloth or piece of gauze around your fingertip and rub the teeth.

The next step is to use a safe, natural dental cleaning product designed for pets and apply a small amount to the gauze before you rub your pet's teeth. Once he gets used to this, you can progress to either a finger brush or a soft toothbrush the right size for your dog's or cat's mouth.

If your pet is highly resistant to having his teeth rubbed or brushed, there are products available that when applied to the teeth go to work to break down plaque and tartar without brushing. However, the more rubbing and brushing your pet will allow, the more quickly you'll see results, and the easier it will be to maintain your pet's oral health and prevent a painful mouth condition.

## Sources and References

[dvm360 July 22, 2015](#)

<sup>1</sup> [dvm360 Dental Pain Handout](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Purdue University News, April 9, 2009](#)

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