

## Ignoring This? Please Don't – It's Like Dropping a Bomb on Your Pet's Health

About 80% of dogs over age 3 struggle with this heart disease trigger. And yet many doggie parents are so oblivious they hardly notice — no matter how much they care or love their dog. And these types of dogs are the most vulnerable of all. What to watch for and do now.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- About 80% of dogs over the age of 3 have oral disease, typically gum disease
- Plaque and tartar left on your dog's teeth can lead to gum disease, and gum disease has been linked to heart disease in dogs
- To help prevent oral disease in your dog, feed a species-appropriate diet and offer recreational bones or dental chews, and brush your dog's teeth every day
- It's also important to take your dog for regular oral exams with your veterinarian
- With appropriate home care, some dogs will never need a professional tooth cleaning, while other dogs require regular cleanings despite excellent home care

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Estimates are that around 80% of dogs 3 years of age and older have oral disease, typically involving the gums. The problem affects all breeds, but small dogs are more prone to gum disease because they have a lot of teeth crowded into a small space, making cleaning more difficult.

### Plaque Buildup Can Lead to Gum Disease

When plaque isn't removed from your dog's teeth, it collects there and around the gum line and within a few days hardens into tartar. Tartar sticks to the teeth and ultimately irritates the gums. Irritated gums become inflamed — a condition known as gingivitis.

If your dog has gingivitis, the gums will be red rather than pink and his breath may be noticeably stinky. If the tartar isn't removed, it will build up under the gums, eventually causing them to pull away from the teeth. This creates small pockets in the gum tissue that become repositories for additional bacteria.

At this stage, your pet has developed an irreversible condition, periodontal disease, which causes considerable pain and can result in abscesses, infections, loose teeth and bone loss.

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

## **Gum Disease Can Lead to Heart Disease**

When periodontal disease is present, the surface of the 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 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.

What many dog parents don't realize is there's an established link between gum disease and endocarditis, which is an inflammatory condition of the valves or inner lining of the heart.

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.

## **Five Steps to Keep Your Dog's Mouth Healthy**

1. Feed a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate, fresh food diet, and feed it raw if possible. When your dog gnaws on raw meat, it acts as a kind of natural toothbrush and dental floss.
2. Offer recreational bones and/or a fully digestible, high-quality dental dog chew to help control plaque and tartar. The effect of dental chews is similar to raw bones, but safer for power chewers or dogs that have restorative dental work and can't chew raw bones.
3. Brush your pet's teeth, preferably every day. If every day is too tall an order, commit to do it several times a week. A little time spent each day brushing your dog's teeth can reap tremendous rewards in terms of his oral health and overall well-being.
4. Perform routine mouth inspections. Your dog should allow you to open his mouth, look inside and feel around for loose teeth or unusual lumps or bumps on the tongue, under the tongue, along the gum line and on the roof of his mouth.

After you do this a few times, you'll become aware of any changes that occur from one inspection to the next. You should also make note of any differences in the smell of your dog's breath that aren't diet-related.

5. Arrange for regular oral exams performed by your veterinarian. He or she will alert you to any existing or potential problems in your pet's mouth, and recommend professional teeth cleaning under anesthesia, if necessary.

If you're vigilant about your dog's dental home care and she doesn't have any special situations that predispose her to tartar build-up or other dental issues, she may never need a professional cleaning by a veterinarian.

However, pets with extreme tartar build-up, badly inflamed gums or oral infections need extra help.

# What to Expect When Your Dog Has a Professional Oral Exam and Teeth Cleaning

Prior to the oral exam and cleaning, your dog should undergo a physical exam and blood tests to insure she can be safely anesthetized for the procedure. The day of the cleaning, she'll be sedated and a tube will be placed to maintain a clear airway and so that oxygen and anesthetic gas can be given.

An IV catheter should also be placed so that fluids and anesthesia can be administered as appropriate throughout the procedure. If you're wondering why pets require general anesthesia and intubation for a seemingly simple procedure, there are a number of benefits:

- Anesthesia immobilizes your dog to insure her safety and cooperation during a confusing, stressful procedure
- It provides for effective pain management during the procedure
- It allows for a careful and complete examination of all surfaces inside the oral cavity, as well as the taking of digital X-rays, which are necessary to address issues that are brewing below the surface of the gums that can't be seen and could cause problems down the road
- It permits the veterinarian to probe and scale as deeply as necessary below the gum line where 60% or more of plaque and tartar accumulate
- Intubation while the patient is under general anesthesia protects the trachea and prevents aspiration of water and oral debris

While your pet is anesthetized, her teeth will be cleaned with an ultrasonic scaler as well as a hand scaler to clean under and around every tooth. Your vet will use dental probes to measure the depths of the pockets in the gum around each tooth, and X-rays should be taken.

Once all the plaque and tartar is off the teeth, your dog's mouth will be rinsed and each tooth will be polished. The reason for polishing is to smooth any tiny grooves on the teeth left by the cleaning so they don't attract more plaque and tartar. After polishing, the mouth is rinsed again.

The oral exam, X-rays and cleaning with no tooth extractions usually takes about 45 minutes to an hour. The cost will depend on where you live, and typically ranges from around \$200 to \$1,000. Veterinary dental specialists often charge more. Extractions are typically priced according to the type of tooth and the time and work needed to remove it. There are simple extractions, elevated extractions and extractions of teeth with multiple roots, which tend to be the priciest.

## Sources and References

[PetMD, October 30, 2024](#)

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