

Are You Missing the Signs That Your Pet Has Dental Problems?

By the age of 3, most pets already have early evidence of periodontal disease. If left untreated, it can lead to pain, bacterial infection and systemic health problems including damage to the kidneys, heart and liver.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- February is Pet Dental Health Month — the perfect opportunity to pay some much-needed attention to your pet's oral health
- Pet dental health needs attention year-round, including daily brushing and a fresh, species-appropriate diet
- By the time you notice significant bad breath or tartar buildup, your pet may have been struggling with poor oral health, and related pain, for some time
- Small mature dogs typically need a professional dental cleaning once a year while larger dogs may need a cleaning slightly less frequently, depending on home care
- Bad breath is the most common sign of dental disease in pets; you may also notice your pet chewing more on one side of the mouth, dropping food, crying when yawning, no longer enjoying chew toys, drooling and acting irritable

February is Pet Dental Health Month — the perfect opportunity to pay some much-needed attention to your pet's chompers. If you like, use this month as a reminder to get your dog or cat's teeth checked out by a veterinarian and professionally cleaned if needed. But remember, dental health needs attention year-round, not just in February.

The fact is, it can be difficult to peer inside your pet's mouth, which means signs of dental disease and fractures can easily go unnoticed. Oral disease can also occur below the gum line, so even if you're able to take a peek, you may not be able to spot signs of trouble (the downside of anesthesia-free dentistry). One study found that in pets with teeth that appeared normal, 41.7% of cats and 27.8% of dogs actually had dental disease.¹

Brushing your pet's teeth daily — yes, it's possible — is one of the best ways to protect their oral health. But if you're not brushing daily, and in some cases even if you are, studies suggest small dogs typically need a professional dental cleaning once a year while larger dogs may need a cleaning once every 1.5 to two years, depending on diet and home oral care.

Signs Your Pet Has Dental Problems

By the age of 3, most pets already have early evidence of periodontal disease. If left untreated, it can lead to pain, bacterial infection and systemic health problems including damage to the kidneys, heart and liver.²

Your pet may be reluctant to eat if his mouth is painful, and you're likely to notice red rather than pink gums along with an accumulation of brown or greenish plaque and tartar on the teeth. You may also notice your pet chewing more on one side of the mouth, dropping food, crying when yawning, no longer enjoying chew toys, drooling and acting irritable, in a worst-case scenario.

However **bad breath**, or halitosis, is the most common sign that your pet has periodontal disease.³ If your pet's breath is smelly, it's likely time for a professional cleaning — and increased attention to brushing and oral health in the future. Remember, by the time you notice significant bad breath or tartar buildup, your pet may have been struggling with poor oral health, and related pain, for some time.

"When dental disease is discovered later, after years of tartar, plaque, and bacteria buildup have caused infection, inflammation, and diseased teeth, your pet has already experienced significant, chronic, life-changing pain," the American Animal Hospital Association explains. "But animals are experts at hiding signs of pain, so the pain may go unnoticed by you."⁴

How to Protect Your Pet's Teeth

Transitioning your cat or dog off of ultraprocessed kibble and onto less refined food — ideally a raw diet — can slow how quickly oral degeneration occurs. However, be aware that even with a healthier, more natural diet, many pets still require professional cleaning to maintain optimal oral health.

Regular brushing is also important. In the video above, I demonstrate how to brush a cat's teeth, and the process is similar for dogs. Before you get to this point, I recommend incorporating facial and gum massages into your daily interaction with your pet, so they aren't stressed having their faces touched.

Once they're used to having their mouths and lips touched, start moving just one finger around inside your pet's mouth very briefly, then gradually move to a piece of gauze, then to a finger toothbrush and finally to a real pet toothbrush. Put a tiny dab of enzymatic tooth gel (preferably one that contains mostly natural ingredients you can pronounce) on your finger, gently pull her lip back and quickly rub the gel over her back molars on one side.

Those upper back molars are where most plaque and tartar accumulate, so spend a couple months just rubbing the cat toothpaste back there. Once that process is going smoothly you can move forward in her mouth to the premolars, canines and incisors. Ideally, do this nightly to reduce plaque and tartar buildup, but even once or twice a week will help protect your pet's oral health and help her avoid many common dental problems.

How Much Does It Cost for a Professional Pet Dental Cleaning?

It's a good idea to budget for one professional dental cleaning for your dog and cat annually, or better yet get pet health insurance, which should cover the bulk of the cost of maintenance oral health. Many veterinarians offer a discount for dentals in February during Pet Dental Health Month. So, by planning ahead, you may be able to take advantage of this discount for your pet.

The cost of getting your dog's teeth professionally cleaned depends on the extent of their dental disease and the services provided. According to PetMD:⁷

*“Teeth cleanings with general practitioners can range from **\$250-\$900**, which may or may not include extractions. Veterinary dentists typically cost more based on their advanced training, equipment, and anesthesia. A typical service with x-rays, exams, and cleanings starts at **\$800-\$1,300**. Nerve blocks, extractions, medications, advanced imaging such as CTs, and root canals will increase the price.”*

Since pets won't hold still for a cleaning, **anesthesia is required** to clean below the gumline where bacteria hide. While anesthesia is typically included in the overall cost of the dental procedure, a blood panel is necessary to check organ function, blood cell and platelet counts prior to anesthesia to ensure your pet is healthy enough for the procedure.

This test may cost \$75 to \$200 and may or may not be included in the cost of the dental procedure.⁸ To keep costs as low as possible, feed your pet a species-appropriate diet and brush regularly to slow the rate plaque and tartar accumulates and extend the time in between professional cleanings. By doing this, you'll also keep your pet's mouth feeling healthy and pain-free, and reduce the risk of systemic diseases from an unhealthy mouth.

Sources and References

^{1,4} [American Animal Hospital Association, 10 Facts You Need to Know to Protect Your Pet's Oral Health](#)

² [Veterinary Oral Health Council, Consequences of Periodontal Disease \(Archived\)](#).

³ [Cornell Feline Health Center, Bad Breath: Sign of Illness?](#)

⁵ [Aust Vet J. 1998 Oct;76\(10\):690-3. doi: 10.1111/j.1751-0813.1998.tb12284.x](#)

⁶ [Aust Vet J. 2016 Jan-Feb;94\(1-2\):18-23. doi: 10.1111/avj.12394](#)

^{7,8} [PetMD January 4, 2023](#)
