

Is Your Pet Suffering from Overlooked Dental Problems?

If your dog is constantly pawing at their mouth and showing signs of grumpiness, such as being irritable, aggressive or easily agitated, they could be in a lot of pain. Once you see these telltale symptoms, seek veterinary help immediately.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- At least 90% of dogs and cats over 3 years old have periodontal disease, which leads to pain, infection and other health issues if left untreated
- Periodontal disease in dogs starts with plaque buildup, leading to tartar formation, gum inflammation and eventually gum recession, which impact their overall health, including the liver and heart
- Signs of dental problems in pets include behavior changes, loss of interest in their food or toys, bad breath, redness or bleeding of gums, and visible tartar buildup
- Regular dental care, including daily tooth brushing, providing dental chews, feeding a balanced diet and scheduling veterinary checkups, is vital for your pet's oral health
- If your pet's oral health is in really bad condition, they may require professional veterinary cleaning

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Here's an interesting fact — Dogs rarely develop cavities. This is because they consume less sugar than humans, and the cavity-causing bacteria species are almost never available in their mouths. Their teeth's structure also makes it difficult for cavities to form.

However, this does not mean your dog doesn't need proper dental care. In fact, studies show that 80% to 90% of dogs and cats 3 years old or older have some form of periodontal disease¹ — a gum condition that leads to pain, infection, tooth loss and other health issues over time.

Many Health Problems Begin in the Mouth

Like humans, companion animals can develop dental problems, such as tooth decay, infections and gum disease (periodontal disease). If left untreated, these conditions will cause significant pain and pave the way for further health problems.

The main culprit in periodontal disease is plaque — this is “an invisible bacterial slime (or biofilm) laid down by bacteria on the surface of the tooth, above and below the gum line.”² If this isn't removed from their teeth, it accumulates and forms around the gum line, hardening into tartar.

Tartar sticks to the teeth and irritates the gums, causing inflammation (gingivitis). Gingivitis will turn the gums red rather than pink and make your pet's breath stinky. If tartar isn't removed, it causes a buildup under the gums, causing them to pull away from the teeth; small pockets, where more bacteria can enter, form in the gum tissue as well. This is what's called periodontal disease.

According to the Cornell Richard P. Riney Canine Health Center, "Preventing periodontal disease is important for your dog's overall health, as it has been linked to liver and heart disease."³ Unfortunately, your pets have no way of communicating with you whenever they're experiencing pain in their mouth. Hence, as pet parents, you need to be extremely vigilant about the state of their oral health, especially as it's been linked to various diseases.

One telltale sign that your pet is struggling with untreated oral health problems is a shift in their behavior. If your pet suddenly shows changes in their temperament, such as loss of affection toward you, it's possible that they are in pain.⁴

Behavior Changes and Other Signs Your Dog's Mouth Is in Pain

In some cases, however, dogs with dental problems will exhibit no signs that they're in pain. This is a survival mechanism, an instinctual behavior found in both domestic pets and their wild ancestors. Most pets, however, will show signs when the pain has become unbearable.

Pets that become more easily agitated, irritable and aggressive, especially when their face or mouth are touched, are likely suffering from dental issues. You will also notice them having less interest in their favorite chew toys, and they may also avoid their food bowl, even their favorite snacks and treats.⁵

When the pain has become too bothersome, your pet may appear less active than usual. They will have no interest in playing with you or their other companion animals.

Another common behavior is pawing at their mouth or their face — they may attempt to rub it against surfaces to ease the discomfort.

Here are other noticeable symptoms of dental distress in pets — if you notice any of them, it's best to make an appointment with your veterinarian to identify or rule out any dental health problems:

- Bad breath or "doggy breath"
- Redness of the gums
- Tenderness around the teeth and gums
- Drooling
- Dropping their food
- Loose and/or broken teeth
- Bleeding from the mouth (or blood on their toys, food dish or bed)
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Brown or greenish buildup of plaque and tartar on the teeth
- Chewing on one side of the mouth

- Crying or yelping when yawning or moving their jaw

Keep Your Dog's Teeth and Mouth Clean and Healthy

Adopting a regular oral hygiene routine for your pet as well as scheduling regular checkups with their vet can go a long way toward ensuring your pet's oral health stays in optimal shape.

If your pet's oral health is in really bad condition, they may require professional veterinary cleaning. Your dog will be placed under general anesthesia, as the vet conducts an extensive visual test. According to the Cornell Richard P. Riney Canine Health Center:⁶

“An extensive visual exam is performed, and the mouth rinsed with antiseptic. Grossly evident tartar is removed, crowns are examined, gingival pockets are probed and measured, full-mouth dental X-rays are taken, and ultrasonic scaling of all tooth surfaces above and below the gum line is performed for plaque removal.

At this point, any necessary surgical procedures (like extraction of diseased teeth) are performed. Next, all remaining teeth are thoroughly polished, above and below the gum line. A final rinse and inspection follows.”

Once your dog recovers from the anesthesia, you will need to follow this up with dental care at home. Here are some strategies to keep in mind:

- **Brush your pet's teeth, ideally every day** — If this isn't possible, do so a few times a week.
- **Let them chew on recreational bones and/or a fully digestible, high-quality dental dog chew** — This will help control plaque and tartar. Dental chews are recommended for power chewers or dogs with restorative dental work who can't chew raw bones.
- **Feed your pet a nutritionally balanced, species-specific, fresh food diet, ideally raw** — Allowing your dog to gnaw on raw meat acts as if they're using a natural toothbrush and dental floss.
- **Conduct routine mouth inspections** — Check for unusual lumps, loose teeth or signs of bleeding. Check the smell of their breath as well.
- **Schedule regular oral exams with your vet** — They will check for unusual problems in your dog's mouth or if they need to have professional cleaning done.

Sources and References

^{1,2,3,6} [Cornell Richard P. Riney Canine Health Center, Periodontal Disease](#)

^{4,5} [Dunedin Animal Medical Center, The Link Between Dental Health and Behavioral Issues in Pets](#)
