

Dental Disease in Cats

Dental disease is a common and often overlooked problem in cats. Plaque and tartar accumulation cause irritation and infection of the gum tissue. If left untreated, this can lead to gum recession, root exposure, cavities, or abscesses. Dental disease is also a common cause of kidney and heart infections, both of which are life-threatening.

Contributing Factors

One of the main factors determining the amount of tartar buildup is the *individual chemistry* in the mouth. Some cats need yearly cleanings; other cats need a cleaning only once every few years. The ingredients in commercial diets are thought to play a role, although research is ongoing. The high level of grains found in common pet foods can change the Ph of the saliva. This can lead to more bacterial accumulation and dental disease.

There has been a lot of misinformation regarding canned food diets in relation to dental disease. Canned food plays a very minor role in plaque and tartar accumulation. The increased water content in canned food does not cause tooth decay. In addition, most dry food diets do not keep the teeth clean, as many people have been led to believe. Some “dental” diets may help by gently scraping the teeth but this does not compare to a thorough cleaning.

Lack of daily care is probably the largest contributor to dental disease. Cats in the wild who hunt for their food are constantly crunching small bones, chewing feathers, and shredding flesh. This mechanical cleaning can help over time. Unfortunately, dry commercial diets do not provide the same benefit.

Some diseases such as Felv (Feline Leukemia), FIV (Feline Immunodeficiency Virus), and autoimmune diseases can increase the severity of dental disease and may alert your veterinarian to test for these conditions.

Clinical Signs

In some cases, owners are unaware that their cat has dental disease. The problem may be identified with a routine physical examination or during investigation of another problem. In other situations, the probability of dental disease is apparent to the owner. The cat may have very bad breath (halitosis), difficulty eating, or changes in temperament.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis of dental disease is usually very straightforward. The best place to check for tartar and gingivitis is on the upper back molar. This requires gently pulling back your cat’s upper lip on the side until the large back tooth is visible. In most cases, the true extent of the disease cannot be determined unless the cat is under anesthesia. This facilitates a more complete examination of the oral cavity including checking for cavities and taking dental x-rays.

The Cleaning Process

Proper cleaning of the teeth requires complete cooperation of the patient so that plaque and tartar can be removed properly. Anesthesia is always required to *thoroughly* clean the teeth. Many owners have a high degree of anxiety related to general anesthesia for their cats. While there is always a degree of risk with any anesthetic, be aware that your cat’s health may ultimately be compromised by delaying proper dental care.

To minimize risk, our hospital uses the safest anesthetics and a very high level of monitoring before, during, and after anesthetic. This includes an IV catheter and fluids to help maintain hydration and blood pressure, a warm water bed to prevent hypothermia, a dedicated technician to monitor vitals through the entire procedure, constant EKG, pulse oximetry, CO2 levels, respiration rate/depth, blood pressure, and body temperature. Also, depending on your cat’s age and health status, blood may be drawn prior to anesthesia to evaluate overall risk.

There are three steps in the cleaning process that will be used on your cat:

Scaling removes the tartar above and below the gum line. This is done with hand instruments and ultrasonic cleaning equipment. The tartar, which is under the gums, must be removed for a dental cleaning to be complete.

Polishing with fluoride helps smooth the surface of the teeth, making them resistant to additional plaque formation, decreases teeth sensitivity, and strengthens enamel.

Flushing removes dislodged tartar from the teeth and helps to remove the bacteria that accompany tartar.

Prognosis

In the early stages of dental disease, the problems may be reversible. At some point, however, even cleaning cannot restore the mouth to normal. This is not a reason to avoid cleaning!

The prognosis is worsened if tartar is left on the teeth indefinitely. Some of the consequences of delayed dental care are:

- 1) Tartar will mechanically push the gums away from the roots of the teeth. This allows the teeth to loosen in their sockets and infection to enter the root socket. The teeth will loosen and fall out or have to be extracted.
- 2) Infection will accumulate in the mouth, resulting in gingivitis (gums), tonsillitis, pharyngitis (sore throat), or facial abscesses. Although antibiotics may temporarily suppress the infection, if the tartar is not removed from the teeth, infection will return quickly.
- 3) Infection within the mouth will be picked up by the blood stream and carried to other parts of the body. Kidney and heart infections frequently begin in the mouth and are life threatening.

Prevention

Several preventive measures can be recommended to aid in oral hygiene for your cat.

- Seek regular veterinary care and have the teeth cleaned when advised.
- Try to maintain home dental care by one or more of the following options; brushing teeth, dental diets used as treats, oral tartar control products, anti-bacterial products:
- **Home Dental Brushing:** Go to www.felinevideos.vet.cornell.edu for instructional video. Cats can have their teeth brushed, but it depends on your kitty's disposition, and how much time and patience you are willing to commit. To begin brushing your cat's teeth, please follow the steps below:

- 1. Start with a Q-tip dipped in tuna juice from canned tuna in water and just let your kitty lick it off for 2-3 days.*
- 2. Once your kitty is used to this, while your kitty is licking off tuna juice, try to gently brush one of the upper canines. Just try for a second or two. Do this for 2-3 days, until your kitty is comfortable with this. If your kitty becomes upset, discontinue for that day and try again the following day. We want this to be a positive experience.*
- 3. After your kitty will let you brush one canine tooth, move on to the other canine tooth. Just keep working with your kitty one tooth at a time until you are able to brush all of the teeth.*
- 4. If your kitty has graduated through these steps well, then we recommend purchasing the CET® toothbrush starter kit from The Cat Doctor retail area. It comes with a fingerbrush, toothbrush, and a tube of enzymatic toothpaste specially designed for cats. Repeat steps 1-3 using a brush versus the Q-tip, and add the toothpaste in as the last step.*

We recommend brushing your cat's teeth 2-3 times per week. Daily brushings should take no more than 60 seconds. As you may know, cats like routines...they don't like surprises. Try to set up a regular tooth-brushing schedule with your cat, brushing teeth at the same time of day. This will help to promote a trust relationship between you and your cat.

- **Oxyfresh® Oral Hygiene Solution:** This is a tasteless, odorless solution formulated to promote healthy gum tissue and improve oral hygiene. It effectively eliminates pet breath odors and helps reduce plaque and tartar formation. Mix 1 tsp. of concentrate per 1 quart of pet drinking water. Replace the pet's water daily with this solution. If you are using a fountain, the carbon filter does not need to be removed.
A 4oz. bottle of concentrate will provide 24 liters of drinking water solution. A 16oz. bottle is also available.
- **MaxiGuard OraZn Gel:**
Daily, apply the gel to the outside of your kitty's teeth, and it will distribute to cover the other teeth as well. One drop applied to your finger, a q-tip, or toothbrush will be most accepted by an adult cat. OraZn gel is effective with or without regular brushing.