VETERINARY TODAY INTERNATIONAL
ISSN 2583-8288

# A Healthy Smile for a Happier Pet: A Complete Guide to Dental Care in Dogs and Cats

**Nikhil Mudgil[1], Sonal Dixit[1], Satbir Sharma[2], Sandeep Saharan[2]**
[1] Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Veterinary Surgery and Radiology, Lala Lajpat Rai University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Hisar, Haryana, India.
[2] Assistant Professor, Veterinary Clinical Complex (VCC), Lala Lajpat Rai University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Hisar, Haryana, India
doi.org/10.5281/VeterinaryToday.23655922

We are responsible for providing our pets with food, exercise, grooming, and medical care, but there is one important aspect of their health which is frequently ignored: their teeth and gums. It is common for people to consider bad breath as something normal when owning a dog or a cat, and yellow teeth and red gums can go undetected for months. However, these seemingly small changes can be signs of dental disease which leads to discomfort, infection, and in the end, the loss of teeth. Dental health is not just about keeping a pet's teeth white; it is about ensuring a comfortable mouth, keeping the tissues that support the teeth in good condition, and aiding pets in eating, playing, and interacting as they should. The good news is that dental problems can be prevented or controlled through regular home care, proper nutrition, and routine visits to the veterinarian.

## What Is Dental Disease?

Dental plaque is a soft film made up of bacteria which builds up on the surfaces of the teeth. When it is not regularly removed, the minerals in the saliva can cause it to harden and form calculus, which is usually known as tartar. It is also possible for plaque to accumulate below the gum line, causing inflammation and harming the tissues that support the teeth. The changes in the early stages can be reversed. But as the disease advances, damage to the periodontal ligament and the surrounding bone may become irreversible and this can eventually result in loose teeth or the loss of teeth. A pet can experience ongoing pain even though it continues to eat and behave as if it were normal. Since dogs and cats are unable to tell us when a tooth is causing them pain, some of them will keep on eating even when they are in considerable oral discomfort. Therefore, a normal appetite does not mean that the animal has a healthy mouth and routine dental examinations are thus an essential element of preventive veterinary care.

## Recognising the Warning Signs

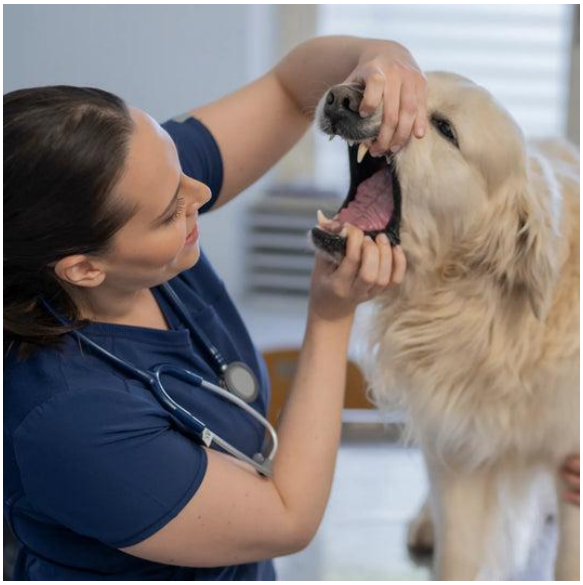

*Figure 1. Veterinary examination of a dog's oral cavity.*

Persistent bad breath could signal plaque build-up, gingivitis, periodontal disease, or another oral issue, and it should not be assumed to be normal. Healthy gums should not remain inflamed or bleed when handled normally. Redness at the gumline may be an early indication of gingivitis. If a tooth is damaged it may expose sensitive inner tissues and thus allow bacteria to cause an infection. The fact that a tooth is loose may show that there has been a loss of supporting structures. Drop some food, chew on one side, avoid eating hard food, drool excessively, paw at the mouth, or resist having facial contact could all be signs of oral discomfort. Further signs include swelling of the face, saliva that is blood-stained, difficulty in swallowing, and a reluctance to play with chew toys. Yet some animals display only minor symptoms even though their dental disease is advanced. When to seek help: Arrange a veterinary examination if these signs occur—facial swelling, significant bleeding, severe pain, or difficulty eating or swallowing warrant prompt assessment. Difficulty breathing or inability to swallow requires emergency veterinary care.

**Common Dental Problems and Their Management**

**Periodontal Disease: Prevention Is Essential**

*Figure 3. Heavy dental calculus requiring veterinary assessment.*

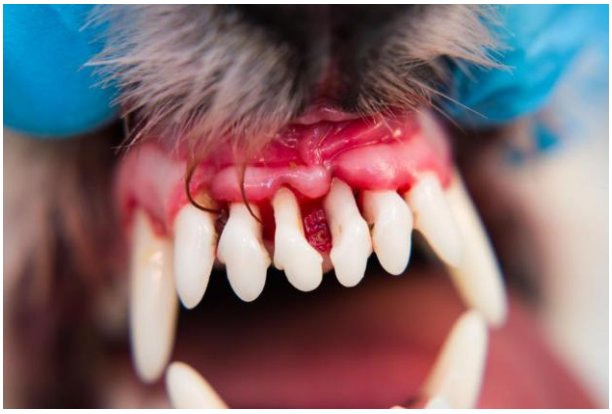

*Figure 4. Inflamed gingiva requiring appropriate veterinary assessment.*

Periodontal disease affects the gums and the structures that hold teeth in place. It usually begins with plaque-induced gingivitis, where the gums become red and inflamed. If the disease progresses, it can destroy deeper tissues and the supporting bone, leading to periodontitis.

**Management**

Early gingivitis can often be reversed with effective plaque removal and a consistent at-home dental hygiene routine.

With the animal under general anesthesia, the veterinarian is able to remove the plaque and calculus both above and below the gumline.

In more advanced cases of the disease periodontal treatment, dental radiographs will be needed and if a tooth cannot be kept comfortably then extraction will have to take place.

Having ongoing home care and having the vet carry out further checks helps to lower the chance of recurrence.

Once the supporting bone has lost a considerable amount, it can no longer be regained by brushing alone. It is therefore better to focus on prevention and early treatment than to wait until the teeth become loose.

**Fractured Teeth: Why Hard Objects Can Be Dangerous**

Although dogs generally like to chew, not all items they chew are safe since bones, antlers, hooves, and very hard synthetic toys have the potential to break teeth. If a tooth breaks and the pulp which is the inner portion containing the nerves and blood vessels is exposed, this can result in severe pain, inflammation, infection, and death of the tissue.

The management of the situation should involve a veterinarian who will examine the fractured tooth and could suggest either extraction or special treatment to keep the tooth, based on the extent of the damage and the particular tooth affected. It is not necessary to wait until there is obvious pain; some fractures can be surprisingly quiet. Select chewing products that are suitable for the size of the animal and its chewing habits. Do not choose items that are so hard that they will not give way when pressure is applied.

**Retained Baby Teeth and Dental Crowding**

Puppies and kittens have temporary teeth which appear before their permanent teeth come through. It sometimes happens that a baby tooth stays in the mouth together with its permanent tooth. This can cause crowding, shift tooth position, and create areas where plaque builds up.

Management involves carrying out routine oral examinations as the animal grows in order to detect any retained teeth, abnormal eruption, and uncomfortable contact between the teeth. It may be necessary for a veterinarian to extract a retained primary tooth in order to safeguard the developing permanent teeth. However, owners must not try to remove teeth themselves at home.

**Discoloured or Non-vital Teeth**

A tooth that turns grey, purple, or brown may have internal damage, sometimes after trauma. Discoloration can indicate that the pulp is no longer healthy, but appearance alone cannot confirm the diagnosis.

Management: Veterinary examination and dental radiographs may be needed to assess the tooth and surrounding bone. Treatment may involve root canal therapy or extraction.

**Oral Masses, Swelling and Other Problems**

Not every oral abnormality is caused by plaque. Abnormal growths, jaw injuries, developmental problems, and other diseases can affect the mouth. A lump, persistent ulcer, unexplained bleeding, or localized swelling should be examined rather than treated with home remedies.

**Brushing Your Pet's Teeth**

*Figure 2. A dental chew toy can complement, but not replace, toothbrushing.*

Regular toothbrushing is one of the most useful ways to remove plaque before it hardens into calculus. It works best when you introduce it gradually and maintain it consistently.

**A Simple Approach for Owners**

Start slowly. Choose a quiet time and let your pet get comfortable with gentle handling of its lips and muzzle.

Introduce the taste. Allow your pet to lick a small amount of toothpaste formulated specifically for dogs or cats.

Use the right brush. A soft-bristled pet toothbrush or an appropriately sized finger brush may be suitable, depending on the animal's mouth and tolerance.

Focus on the outer surfaces. Gently brush along the junction between the teeth and

gums, where plaque commonly accumulates. Avoid forcing the mouth open.

Build a routine. Aim to brush daily, if tolerated. Even a short, positive session is a useful starting point.

Use toothpaste specifically formulated for the species. Don't use human toothpaste because ingredients and formulations intended for people may be unsuitable for pets. Never force brushing on an animal showing pain, fear, or resistance; if you suspect discomfort, have a vet examine the mouth.

Brushing primarily helps control plaque. It does not remove substantial established calculus or treat advanced periodontal disease. A professional dental procedure may be necessary before home care can be effective.

**Dental Diets, Treats and Chew Toys**

Nutrition and appropriate chewing products can support a dental care program, but they ought to complement not replace brushing and veterinary examinations.

**Dental Diets**

Some specially formulated diets are designed to reduce plaque or calculus accumulation through kibble structure or other mechanisms. Choose a complete, balanced diet suited to your pet's age, size, and health status. Not all dry foods have a proven dental benefit.

**Dental Chews and Treats**

Choose appropriately sized products intended for the species and chewing style. Look for products accepted by the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC), whose program evaluates evidence for plaque or calculus reduction.

**Safe Chew Toys**

Avoid extremely hard objects such as antlers, bones, and hard hooves that can fracture teeth. Supervise chewing and discard damaged toys or chews that could be swallowed or cause choking. Treats add calories, so factor them into the daily diet and avoid overfeeding. If a pet has food allergies, obesity, kidney disease, or another condition needing a therapeutic diet, discuss dental products and dietary changes with the veterinarian first. For cats, use feline-appropriate dental diets and treats rather than assuming that a product designed for dogs is suitable.

**How Often Should Pets Have Dental Examinations?**

No single schedule suits every dog or cat. The need for professional care depends on mouth condition, previous dental disease, age, breed, tooth alignment, home hygiene, and other health factors. Small-breed dogs and brachycephalic animals with crowded or rotated teeth may need particular attention. Kittens and puppies also benefit from oral exams during tooth eruption, when vets can identify retained baby teeth and bite abnormalities early.

As a practical routine:

At home: Check visible teeth and gums regularly, if your pet tolerates it.

At veterinary visits: Ask for an oral health assessment, even when the appointment is for vaccination or another concern.

When disease is suspected: Arrange a targeted examination rather than waiting for the next routine visit.

After professional treatment: Follow the veterinarian's recommendations for rechecks and ongoing preventive care.

The AAHA guidelines recommend a true preventive dental procedure by around one year of age for cats and small- to medium-breed dogs, and by around two years for larger-breed dogs. These are guideline recommendations, not a reason to delay treatment when abnormalities are already present.

**Dental Care at Every Life Stage**

**Puppies and Kittens**

Introduce gentle mouth handling and positive brushing experiences early. Monitor the transition from baby teeth to permanent teeth, and seek advice about retained teeth, crowding or abnormal bites.

**Adult Pets**

Maintain a brushing routine, choose suitable dental products and arrange regular oral examinations. Do not assume that a pet has

healthy teeth simply because it is eating normally.

**Senior Pets**

Watch for bad breath, changes in chewing, loose teeth, and facial sensitivity. Older animals may have accumulated years of dental disease, but appropriate treatment can still improve comfort and quality of life.

**Common Mistakes to Avoid**

Assuming bad breath is normal and doesn't require investigation.
Waiting for a pet to stop eating before suspecting dental pain.
Using human toothpaste or unverified home remedies inside the mouth.
Giving very hard bones, antlers, or toys that may fracture teeth.
Relying on dry food, dental treats, or chew toys as the only form of dental care.
Attempting to scrape established tartar or extract teeth at home.
Giving leftover antibiotics or human painkillers without veterinary advice.
Believing that a visually clean tooth necessarily has a healthy root and supporting bone.
Failing to attend the veterinary follow-up after dental treatment.
Antibiotics do not remove calculus or repair damaged tooth-supporting tissues. They are not a substitute for appropriate dental treatment and should be used only when a veterinarian clinically indicates them.

**A Simple Dental-Care Checklist**

**Your Pet's Oral-Health Routine**

Inspect visible teeth and gums regularly, if your pet tolerates it.
Brush with a pet-specific toothbrush and toothpaste.
Choose appropriately sized dental products and avoid excessively hard chews.
Look for persistent bad breath, bleeding, swelling, or changes in eating.
Discuss oral health at routine veterinary appointments.
Follow the veterinarian's recommendations for professional cleaning and treatment.

**Conclusion**

Dental care is essential to responsible pet ownership. Healthy teeth and gums depend on more than occasional cleaning: they require daily preventive habits, appropriate nutrition, safe chew choices, and consistent veterinary assessment. Noticing early signs of disease and seeking treatment before substantial damage occurs can help prevent avoidable pain and preserve oral function. A pet may not be able to tell you its mouth hurts, but its teeth, gums, breath, and eating behavior can offer important clues. A few minutes of daily oral care, combined with professional veterinary guidance, can create a meaningful difference to your companion's comfort and well-being.