



The Truth about Dog Dental Disease

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A large percentage of dogs we see every day have dental disease. Because it is such a huge component in their overall well-being, we recommend having a “dental” performed on these patients. Many times, the pet parent responds, “I give my dog rawhides/dental sticks/greenies”. What you may not know is, while these products help keep teeth clean, they do not remove stuck on calculus and tartar. Unlike humans, most dogs do not get their teeth brushed regularly. Therefore, a yearly dental cleaning is very important to maintain a healthy pet and keep bacteria from their mouth from entering their blood stream.

The term “dental” does not actually explain the procedure very well. A more accurate term is “Comprehensive Oral Health Assessment and Treatment”. Our patients receive full blood work before anesthesia is administered, the latest and safest pre-medication, customized anesthetic protocols based on their organ function, age, breed, and other underlying disease processes (such as heart murmurs), full mouth dental radiographs to show what is going on below the gum line, a complete oral exam to check for pockets, broken teeth, and mobile teeth, and, of course, ultrasonic and hand scaling to remove all of the tartar above and below the gum line. The procedure is concluded with polishing of all surfaces to smooth out any micro-ridges which could allow plaque to adhere. Sometimes, we recommend extraction of one or more teeth. There are a multitude of reasons teeth may require extraction, the three most common are:

1. Broken teeth with exposure of the pulp (nerve) cavity: This is painful for your pet and allows bacteria an entrance into the tooth, which nearly always leads to an abscess of the tooth’s roots. In some cases, teeth like these may be candidates for root canal, however this would require referral of your pet to a veterinary dental specialist. Broken teeth are usually caused by chewing on a hard toys or rocks.

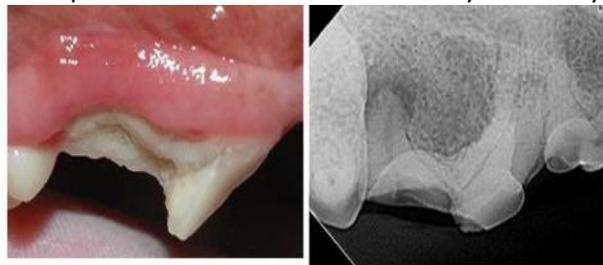


Figure 1: Photo Credit to Jan Bellows, DVM

2. Excessive periodontal attachment loss: This occurs due to infection followed by inflammation of the gum tissue and makes it so the tooth becomes loose and ineffective when your dog is chewing.

3. Evidence of bone loss: An example of this is seen on the following dental radiograph, and it occurs most often due to tooth root abscess. In rare cases, it can also be seen with other disease processes.



Figure 2: afd.avdc.org/pet-periodontal-disease/

Many owners are concerned their dog will not be able to eat if teeth are extracted. But in reality, teeth with these problems were most likely not being used to chew before they came in, due to pain. Occasionally, some dogs need all of their teeth extracted due to the extent of the disease processes. These patients end up feeling better and doing really well just a few days after the extractions are performed. They eat well and have more energy when the infection is cleared. In fact, most owners tell us they feel like they have a new dog after having these diseased teeth removed!

Unfortunately, there are many toys on the market which can lead to broken teeth. Therefore, we do not recommend giving them to your dog. One good rule of thumb is: "if it would hurt to hit your knee cap with it, it is too rigid for your dog's teeth". Examples are: antlers, bones, and ice cubes. Kong toys are a fun choice for a chew toy, but ANY chew toy should be replaced if your pet gets pieces of it to come off. Also, choose toys large enough that your dog cannot swallow them whole. For a list of products proven to help with oral health, visit the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) website, and/or look for the VOHC Seal of Approval on the bag of the product you purchase.

A newer procedure in the dental world which has received a lot of attention lately is “anesthesia-free” dental scaling. While we understand the idea behind it, the Doctors and staff of Companion’s Choice Animal Hospital do not recommend it. We feel a comprehensive and thorough exam including probing of each tooth cannot be done on a dog while it is awake. Proper scaling of the teeth includes getting the tartar under the gumline removed as well. This procedure also does not allow for full mouth dental radiographs to assess the tooth roots and bone structure. On many veterinary dental websites, there are an excessive number of dental radiographs (done after anesthetic free dentistry) showing severe periodontal disease in dogs whose teeth now appear healthy above the gumline. The difficult part for us as your pet’s advocate is, because the crowns appear clean, we may not recommend a dental cleaning, radiographs and evaluation. This often leads to the pet living with unnecessary pain and infection for much longer than they would have normally.

Don’t want your dog to lose teeth?

The best way to prevent the need for tooth extraction is by being pro-active. Brushing daily is the number one way to prevent pathology. This can be started when the pet is young, and should be done at least every other day. A human toothbrush can be used, but a toothpaste specifically formulated for dogs which does not contain fluoride is highly recommended. Other preventative measures include certain types of food or treats and oral cleansing wipes or gels that can be brushed on. The compounds in the gels and wipes tend to last longer than toothpaste to prevent tartar adhesion. However, even if you are doing a great job with the preventative measure you choose for your pet, we will recommend a complete dental cleaning and evaluation of x-rays and each tooth when tartar starts to form. After the first one your pet needs, they are recommended yearly. This procedure, when done well, helps to catch disease early, before it is irreversible, and allows you and your veterinarian the ability to keep your dog happy and healthy longer!

If you have any questions about what is involved in a dental cleaning, or would like to know if your dog’s teeth need attention, please call us at 402-462-2234! We would love to talk to you!