

LAKESIDE ANIMAL HOSPITAL, Ltd.

211 West Bender Road
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53217-4398
414/962-8040

Dental Disease in Dogs

Dental disease is a common and often overlooked problem in dogs. While cavities represent the most common dental disease of humans, dogs are more frequently bothered by tartar buildup on the teeth. Tartar accumulation leads to irritation of the gums around the base of the teeth, ultimately leading to exposure of the roots. Potential outcomes of this tooth root exposure include gum infections and tooth loss.

Contributing Factors

One of the main factors determining the amount of tartar buildup is the individual chemistry in the mouth. Some dogs need yearly cleanings; other dogs need a cleaning only once every few years.

Diet plays more of a minor role in development of tartar accumulation than most people think. Because dry food is not as sticky as canned food, it does not adhere to the teeth as much and thus, does not cause tartar buildup as rapidly. However, eating dry foods does not remove tartar from the teeth. Once tartar forms, a professional cleaning is necessary.

Causes/Transmission

Many different disorders can lead to dental disease in the dog. In general, the veterinarian will try to determine whether the problem is limited to the oral cavity (primary dental disease) or has developed as a consequence of another disease (secondary dental disease).

Clinical Signs

In some cases, owners are unaware that their dog 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 dog may have very bad breath (halitosis), difficulty eating, drooling, or changes in temperament.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis of dental disease is usually very straightforward. A visual examination of the oral cavity reveals tartar and gingivitis. However, in most cases, the true extent of the disease cannot be determined unless the dog is under anesthesia. This facilitates a more complete examination of the oral cavity.

Treatment

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

To minimize risk, our hospital uses modern anesthetics that are deemed safe even for older dogs. Also, depending on your dog's age and general health status, blood may be drawn prior to anesthesia to evaluate blood cell counts and blood chemistry.

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

1. *Scaling* removes the tartar above and below the gum line. This is done with hand instruments and ultrasonic cleaning equipment. The tartar that is under the gums must be removed for a dental cleaning to be complete.
2. *Polishing* smoothes the surface of the teeth, making them resistant to additional plaque formation.
3. *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. The 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, and pharyngitis (sore throat). 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.

Prevention

Several preventive measures can be recommended to aid in oral hygiene for the dog.

1. Seek regular veterinary care and have the teeth cleaned when advised.
2. Try to maintain home dental care with brushing the teeth. Special toothbrushes and flavored toothpastes are available. We will be happy to show you how to do this and to recommend a schedule.
3. A tartar control diet is available through our clinic. It can be used as a maintenance diet or as a treat. It will not clean the teeth but will prolong the interval between professional cleanings (under anesthesia).

If we are planning to clean your dog's teeth, please follow these recommendations:

In order for us to clean your dog's teeth, we ask that you schedule the procedure a few days in advance. It will be necessary to withhold food after 8 PM the night before; please do not remove the water. Your dog should be admitted to the hospital early by 7:30 to 8:00 AM and will generally be ready for discharge in the late afternoon. It will need to stay indoors that evening to insure that no accidents (falls, etc.) occur until complete recovery from anesthesia. If that is not possible, you may elect to have the dog spend the night in the hospital. It should be fed and watered lightly that evening and return to normal feeding the next morning, at which time it should be completely recovered from the anesthetic. This will be explained in ore complete details when your pet is picked up.

