

Dental Cleaning

- 85% of all pets have periodontal disease by the time they are 3 years of age.
- Dental disease can result in bad breath, painful chewing, and tooth loss.
- Bacteria under the gum can travel to the heart, kidneys, and liver.
- A professional dental cleaning is required to remove plaque and tartar from a pet's teeth and to assess the health of the mouth.
- A thorough dental cleaning requires that the pet be under anesthesia.
- Regular, at-home dental care can help improve the health of your pet's mouth and lengthen the intervals between professional dental cleanings.

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It's estimated that 85% of all pets have periodontal disease by the time they are 3 years of age. Periodontal disease is a progressive disease of the supporting tissues surrounding teeth and the main cause of early tooth loss.

Periodontal disease starts when bacteria combine with food particles to form plaque on the teeth. Within days, minerals in the saliva bond with the plaque to form tartar, a hard substance that adheres to the teeth. The bacteria work their way under the gums and cause gingivitis—inflammation of the gums. Once under the gums, bacteria destroy the supporting tissue around the tooth, leading to tooth loss. This condition is known as *periodontitis*. Gingivitis and periodontitis make up the changes that are referred to as *periodontal disease*. The bacteria associated with periodontal disease can also travel in the bloodstream to infect the heart, kidneys, and liver.

A professional veterinary dental cleaning is the only way to remove tartar from the teeth and under the gum tissue to protect your pet's health. With a professional dental cleaning and follow-up care, gingivitis is reversible. Periodontal disease is not reversible, but diligent at-home dental care and regular veterinary cleanings can slow down the progression of the condition.

What Is a Dental Cleaning?

During a dental cleaning (sometimes called a *prophylaxis*), (1) plaque and tartar are removed from a pet's teeth and (2) the health of the entire mouth (tongue, gums, lips, and teeth) is assessed. A thorough dental cleaning can be accomplished only while the pet is under general anesthesia. Anesthesia keeps your pet free of pain during the dental procedure and allows your veterinarian to fully inspect the teeth and remove tartar from under the gums. During anesthesia, a soft plastic tube is inserted into the trachea (the main airway in the throat) to support the patient's breathing. Placement of the tracheal tube also prevents inhalation of bacteria that are aerosolized during the dental cleaning.

Regular, at-home dental care can help improve the health of your pet's mouth and lengthen the intervals between professional dental cleanings.

A dental cleaning may include the following:

- Removal of visible plaque and tartar from the teeth
- Elimination of plaque and tartar from under the gum
- Probing of dental sockets to assess dental disease
- Polishing to smooth enamel scratches that may attract bacteria
- Dental radiographs (x-rays) to evaluate problems below the gum line
- Application of fluoride or a dental sealer
- Removal or repair of fractured or infected teeth
- Dental charting so progression of dental disease can be monitored over time
- Inspection of the lips, tongue, and entire mouth for growths, wounds, or other problems

Preventive Care

How Do I Know if My Pet Needs a Dental Cleaning?

Regular inspection of your pet's mouth is important to catch dental disease in the early stages. Tartar may appear as a brownish-gold buildup on the teeth, close to the gum line. Redness or bleeding along the gum line may indicate gingivitis. Other signs of dental disease include:

- Bad breath
- Drooling
- Pawing at the mouth
- Difficulty chewing
- Loose or missing teeth

If you notice any of these signs in your pet, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian.

What Are the Benefits of a Dental Cleaning?

A professional dental cleaning removes not only the visible plaque and tartar on the teeth surfaces but also the bacteria under the gums. This eliminates potential sources of infection to the mouth and other organs and protects your pet from pain and tooth loss.

What Can I Do to Keep My Pet's Teeth Clean?

Once a dental cleaning has been performed, you can take a number of steps at home to keep your pet's teeth clean and lengthen the intervals between dental cleanings.

Your veterinarian may recommend a plaque prevention product—a substance that you apply to your pet's teeth and gums on a weekly basis. The product adheres to the teeth surface to create a barrier that prevents plaque from forming.

Just as in people, daily brushing can help remove food particles from between your pet's teeth. You can use a child's toothbrush or purchase a finger brush from your veterinarian. Human toothpastes should be avoided because they contain ingredients that should not be swallowed by your pet. Your dog or cat may like the taste of pet toothpaste, which is available in flavors such as chicken, seafood, and malt.

Several dental diets and treats can also help keep plaque and tartar to a minimum. The diets tend to have larger kibbles to provide abrasive action against the tooth surface when chewed. Or they may contain ingredients that help prevent tartar mineralization. Ask your veterinarian which diets or treats are appropriate for your pet.