

# The Dental Examination

- A dental exam is performed by your veterinarian to determine the overall dental health of your pet.
- A dental exam can help identify early signs of dental disease.
- Left untreated, periodontal disease can lead to kidney problems, heart disease, and other health issues.

### What Is a Dental Exam?

The term *dental disease* in dogs and cats is very broadly used to describe gingivitis (inflammation of the gums) and periodontitis (inflammation of the bone and other support structures around the tooth). Another term commonly used to collectively describe these two conditions is *periodontal disease*.

According to a study by the American Veterinary Dental Association, over 80% of dogs and cats older than 3 years have some form of periodontal disease. It's very important to keep your pet's teeth clean and healthy, and a good way to start is by having your veterinarian perform regular dental examinations on your pet.

### How Is a Dental Exam Performed?

As with any other medical condition, a dental examination generally begins with a medical history. Before performing a dental exam, your veterinarian may ask if you have noticed bad breath, excessive drooling, or pawing at the mouth, which can indicate that your pet suffers from a dental issue.

Your veterinarian will then begin by examining your pet's head and neck, noticing any abnormalities, such as swellings, lumps, pain, or enlarged lymph nodes. An abscess is a collection of pus surrounded by inflamed tissue. Abscessed teeth can cause swelling of the cheek and jaw and are usually very painful. Lymph nodes become enlarged when infection is present. Your veterinarian will also smell your pet's breath. Bad breath is a sign of periodontal disease.

Next, your veterinarian will check your pet's teeth and gums for redness, bleeding, and inflammation. Gingivitis (inflammation or infection of the gums)

can cause the gums to appear red or swollen and to bleed easily. Gingivitis can result from either accumulation of bacteria at the gum line or infection with certain viruses (such as feline leukemia virus and calicivirus). Gingivitis can be painful and can progress to periodontal disease, tooth abscesses, and tooth loss.

During a dental exam, your veterinarian will examine your pet's teeth for damage (such as cracks and plaque and tartar. Plaque is the yellow, gummy substance that sticks to teeth; it eventually hardens to become dental tartar. Daily toothbrushing helps to remove plaque, but once tartar forms, it can be removed only by professional dental cleaning.

Plaque and tartar harbor bacteria, which can attack the teeth, gums, bones, and surrounding structures. Bacteria from periodontal disease can also enter the bloodstream and affect the liver, kidneys, and heart, causing further problems.

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When examining your pet's mouth, your veterinarian will also look for lumps or growths that could be oral cancers. If any questionable lumps are seen, a biopsy may be recommended to determine if the growth is cancerous.

Some parts of a dental exam, such as those mentioned above, can generally be performed without sedation. However, if a patient is very painful or is aggressive during physical examination, your veterinarian may recommend sedation to complete even a brief or partial dental examination. A full dental examination, which requires sedation,

involves probing the gum line and spaces between the teeth for pockets.

### Dental X-rays

Dental x-rays may be obtained during a dental examination. X-rays can help your veterinarian to determine the health of the roots of the teeth and to diagnose impactions (teeth that are wedged in and can't move into a normal position), fractures, and tooth root abscesses. Sedation is required for obtaining dental x-rays.

### What Are the Benefits of a Dental Exam?

Healthy teeth are important for your pet's overall health. A dental examination can alert you and your veterinarian to dental issues in your pet and can help determine the most effective treatment. Without proper dental care, pets may develop painful periodontal disease, suffer from inflamed gums, and even lose teeth.

Young puppies and kittens can also benefit from dental examinations. As puppy and kitten teeth are replaced by adult teeth, your veterinarian can perform a brief dental exam to see if all of the adult teeth are coming in normally. Sometimes, puppy or kitten teeth don't fall out when they should, which

can interfere with the positioning of the adult teeth as they try to come in. Puppy and kitten checkups are ideal for reviewing toothbrushing tips with your veterinary team and for getting your pet used to dental exams.

### At-Home Dental Care

After the dental examination, your veterinarian may recommend that your pet receive a dental cleaning. At-home dental treatments such as toothbrushing, dental rinses or gels, dental chew toys, and other types of dental care may also be recommended. There is even a vaccine available (for dogs) that can help prevent periodontitis. After performing a dental examination, your veterinarian can discuss with you whether the dental vaccine may benefit your dog's oral health.

Most people brush their teeth regularly, but many of our pets don't have the benefit of consistent at-home care. If you currently have an at-home dental care program for your pets, congratulations! Regular dental exams with your veterinarian are a good way to evaluate your program and determine if adjustments are needed. If you aren't yet giving your pets at-home dental care, a dental exam can tell you how your pet's teeth are doing and what you need to do to help maintain your pet's oral health.