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Feline Dental Care

Tooth and gum problems occur in eight of ten cats over the age of three. Plaque (food debris and bacteria) collects on the teeth and hardens to form tartar. This irritates the gums causing gingivitis, bad breath and loss of teeth. The bacteria can enter the bloodstream and cause serious internal damage.

Periodontal disease

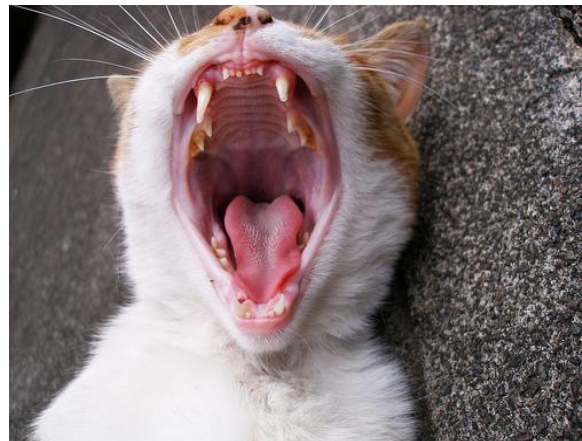
Periodontal disease means any disease around the outside of the tooth. The most common types of dental disease are as follows: -

Gingivitis

Gingivitis means inflammation of the gingiva (gum surrounding the tooth). Gingivitis is extremely common, found in cats of all ages and varies widely in severity.

Mild gingivitis is very common in cats of all ages. It can occur as quickly as 48 hours after cleaning when plaque formation will have begun. Mild gingivitis does not effect the tooth root and brushing the teeth on a daily basis easily reverses most cases.

Moderate gingivitis is also very common. If plaque is allowed to form on the teeth then the gingiva will become more inflamed as time progresses. Sometimes gum recession can be seen at this stage. Gingival "pockets" may also be evident. A gingival pocket is where the gum has started to separate from the tooth, providing a perfect site for food, bacteria, plaque and tartar to form. If calculus hasn't already formed, most cases of moderate gingivitis can also be reversed with regular daily or twice daily brushing. However pocket formation is difficult to reverse.



Severe gingivitis can be very painful for a cat. Severe gingivitis is common in cats that have a lot of plaque and calculus on their teeth. Gum recession is also

common, but may not always be obvious since the gums are so inflamed. Gingival pockets can sometimes be seen and are usually deeper than those found with moderate gingivitis. Severe gingivitis cannot usually be reversed with brushing, and often the mouths are too sore to brush. The cat will usually require a general anaesthetic to carry out a scale and polish of the teeth. If there is a severe degree of gum recession exposing the tooth root then the tooth may need to be extracted.



Danger Signs

Clinical signs of advanced dental disease include; bad breath, reddened gums, yellowish-brown tartar on teeth, drooling, trouble eating and growling at food. When gingivitis is severe cats may drop their food from their mouths, chew on one side, and lose weight because they are unable to eat. In the wild, a cat in pain would be seen as easy prey so they are experts at hiding illness! Therefore it is important for regular checkups, particularly for older cats. There are a number of factors that can predispose cats to dental disease;

Tooth Alignment

Teeth that are positioned abnormally in the mouth are more likely to accumulate plaque and tartar than those which are correctly positioned. Reasons for misalignment include: -

Breed Type

Short nosed breeds e.g. Persians, Chinchillas, British and Exotic Shorthairs often have abnormally positioned teeth. Their jawbones are often too small to accommodate the dentition, resulting in overcrowding and misalignment of teeth.

Deciduous Tooth Retention

In some circumstances, deciduous teeth (baby/milk teeth) are retained after the permanent teeth have grown through (erupted). If the adult tooth does not push out the deciduous tooth when it erupts the adult tooth may be forced to grow in an abnormally resulting in permanent misalignment.

Trauma of the Jaw or Congenital Abnormalities

Sometimes the jaw of a cat may be of an abnormal shape. If a cat is born with a jaw defect then this can be associated with tooth misalignment and developmental abnormalities e.g. undershot/overshot jaws. Another cause would be trauma resulting from a road traffic accident.

Chemistry in the mouth, host factors and immune response

Some cats will always seem to be prone to dental disease in spite of every effort made to prevent this. It is thought that the chemical make-up of the saliva is one factor affecting dental and gum disease in these cats as well as host factors including immune response.

Infectious disease

Some infectious diseases are associated with gingivitis such as Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV), Feline Leukaemia Virus (FeLV) and Feline Calicivirus.

Prevention is better than Cure

Cats that eat dry kibble are more likely to keep their teeth in good condition for longer as less debris remains on the teeth. Specialist food has been designed to clean the teeth as the kibble is cracked into smaller pieces.



Dental Care Products

Dentagen Aqua Solution can be added to fresh drinking water which is designed to stop plaque sticking to teeth in the first place. It is pleasant tasting and freshens breath.



There are also **fish or chicken flavoured toothpastes** for those cats who would tolerate tooth brushing. Despite popular opinion it is possible to train a cat to accept teeth cleaning with time and patience. This is far easier if introduced early in life, preferably as a kitten. Don't use human toothpaste as it is not designed to be swallowed and can be harmful to your pet. Start by putting tasty toothpaste on your finger and offering it to your cat to lick. Continue this daily for a few days. Finger brushes should be used with caution as they may be accidentally bitten with your finger inside. Using a toothbrush, begin by having your cat face away from you-this stops them reversing. Slowly retract the lip and touch the teeth with the toothbrush allowing them to lick off the toothpaste-be sure to reward your cat with lots of praise. If this is tolerated you can begin applying the bristles to the teeth (but not directly on the gum), remember to keep session short and reward with lots of attention.

Brushing a cat's teeth is likely to be the single most effective way to reduce plaque. Like humans, brushing will not only prevent plaque and tartar formation; it will also promote healthy gums and reduce halitosis (bad breath).

Dental toys designed for cats are scented with catnip to encourage biting behaviour, whilst the mesh coating cleans the teeth as the cat chews on it.

A step by step guide to brushing your cat's teeth

STEP ONE: Let your pet settle - perhaps after having had a lick of the toothpaste. Make sure your cat is comfortable – for example when they're sat on your lap or on a favourite spot.

STEP TWO: Place your hand on their mouth and gently lift the lip to reveal the teeth.

STEP THREE: Gently place the toothbrush onto the rows of teeth. The double sided brush will fit neatly over the teeth. Gently rub the toothbrush back and forwards to clean the teeth and remove plaque.



STEP FOUR: Make sure that both the upper and lower jaws and both sides of the mouth are well cleaned.