

CANINE DENTAL DISEASE

What kinds of dental problems do dogs have?

Dental disease is as common in dogs as it is in humans. The most common form of dental disease in humans is caries (cavities). However, this is not the case in dogs. The most common form of canine dental disease is tartar buildup. This causes irritation of the gums around the base of the teeth (gingivitis), resulting in exposure of the roots. Ultimately, this leads to infection and tooth loss.

Isn't it correct that dogs that eat dry dog food don't have tartar buildup?

There are many misconceptions about tartar buildup in dogs. Diet is probably much less important 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 most types dry foods does not remove tartar from the teeth. Some specially formulated food can help to scrape some amounts of tartar from teeth, but once a significant amount has formed, a professional cleaning is necessary.

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.

What does tartar do to the teeth?

If tartar is allowed to remain on the teeth, several things may happen:

- 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, 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 infections, as well as infections involving the heart valves, frequently begin in the mouth.

What is involved in cleaning my dog's teeth?

Because a proper cleaning of the teeth requires complete cooperation of the patient, anesthesia is required to thoroughly clean the teeth. Although anesthesia always carries a degree of risk, the modern anesthetics in use in our hospital minimize this risk, even for older dogs.

There are four 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.
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.

4. **Fluoride** coating decreases teeth sensitivity, strengthens enamel, and decreases the rate of future plaque formation.