

## **The Effects of Dental Disease in your Pet**

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Your pet's oral health is about more than just bad breath and dirty teeth. Dental disease increases systemic inflammation and this can result in widespread health effects. The mouth and gums can be reservoirs of harmful bacteria and these bacteria can travel throughout the body. In human medicine, there is evidence that dental disease contributes to heart disease, diabetes and respiratory disease. There are fewer studies in veterinary medicine on the effects of dental disease. Some results are contradictory, but research suggests that there are associations between oral disease and systemic diseases such as liver, kidney and heart disease in dogs and cats.

Good oral health is also important for the overall quality of your pet's life. Broken teeth and other conditions that result in exposed pulp are painful. Inflamed gums are known to be extremely painful in humans and are undoubtedly similarly painful in dogs and cats. Pets often don't display signs of oral discomfort and continue to eat despite significant pain. Often owners only become aware that their pet has been painful after the condition has been treated and their pet suddenly shows new energy and is more interactive and playful.

Your pet's oral health can also affect you and your family. A recent study in Japan found bacteria associated with dental disease in dog owners' mouths that normally are only found in dogs.

Keeping your pet's mouth healthy requires a combination of home care and regular care at your veterinarian's office. Daily tooth brushing is just as important for keeping your pet's mouth healthy as it is to your own oral health. A thin film of bacteria called plaque is constantly accumulating on teeth. This can be brushed away but after about 36 hours minerals from the saliva integrate with the plaque and form calculus (tartar). This can only be removed with a cleaning under anesthesia by your veterinarian, but daily brushing can greatly prolong the time between cleanings under anesthesia. Dental diets, dental chews and dental toys can help keep your pet's mouth free of calculus, but daily brushing is the cornerstone of oral health for your pet. Most dogs and cats can learn to tolerate and even enjoy brushing with patience and lots of positive reinforcement.

Annual tooth cleanings under anesthesia are recommended for most pets to remove plaque and calculus above and below the gumline. Polishing the teeth after cleaning is also critical to a healthy mouth by creating a very smooth surface that makes it more difficult for plaque to adhere to the tooth.

Dental disease is the most common finding on physical exam in dogs and cats. If your dog or cat hasn't had an oral exam in the last year, bring your pet to your veterinarian or veterinary dental specialist for a thorough exam. Regular dental care will help your pet live a long and happy life.