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## *Caring for your dog's teeth.*

Ron Hines DVM PhD

### **Dental hygiene.**

Dogs, like humans, have the problem of plaque forming on their teeth.

All dogs eventually suffer from "some form" of dental disease as they grow older.

One of the biggest problem causing tooth and gum disease in dogs is that commercial dry dog diets are formulated and textured to meet the desires of the dog owner – and is not for good oral hygiene.

The villain in tooth and gum disease in dogs and people **is plaque.** Plaque is a mixture of remaining food, and salivary minerals mixed with bacteria and acids produced by the fermentation of food.

These products slowly irritate the gums (periodontal disease), dissolve the teeth and cause bad breath.

This is more so because of the soft diets we feed them - canine genetics, as well as the fact that our dogs now live very long lives.

**Remember, dental and gum disease is basically a matter of prevention.**

There is no cure – once it has begun we can only slow its progress.

Dogs unlike people, rarely suffer from tooth enamel decay.

Vets and concerned dog owners do generally find infection, inflammation and receding of the margins of the gums (gingival) where they abut (touch) the teeth as well as tartar accumulation on the teeth and just below the gum line surrounding the teeth.

A combination of these two problems is the number one causes of strong breathe in your dog, drooling and discomfort.

**Note! >>** It is also suspected that Dental Disease is a major cause of the kidney and heart disease we see in older dogs.

This may be because the bacteria that live in the infected tissue surrounding the teeth enter the blood stream and lodge in these other organs.

Oral examination is the first step to follow when the dog present bad breath.

Gums of these dogs often bleed easily and hard yellow tartar can be seen on the necks and bases of the teeth.

Often one side of the mouth is worse than the other because of chewing habits.

If a systemic illness is the dog may have is suspected that is making it prone to gum disease a blood samples test might be needed.

It is a good idea to have a general blood health screen performed yearly on all dogs over six or seven years of age.

Some breeds / dogs are particularly prone to tartar accumulation and receding gums due to both their genetics and or what we are feeding - table foods and canned diet.

Puppies.

Puppies often have a strong mouth odour at the time they are teething. They may run a fever as well.

This is a natural phenomenon.

One can purchase a benzocaine-containing medication for teething infants and massage it on to the puppy sore loose teeth.

In some instances the temporary teeth or fangs of the upper jaw and occasionally the lower jaw are not shed properly.

This results in the permanent teeth sprouting behind the temporary teeth.

Problematic milk teeth have very short roots and can and should be easily removed by your veterinarian.

Discolouration of teeth.

Mostly soft, discoloured teeth are the milk teeth (deciduous teeth) and are due to mineral deficiencies in the mother.

Less commonly, teeth are discoloured because the dog or the mother received one of the tetracycline antibiotics during or just after pregnancy or the drug was given to the young dog.

Drugs that will discolour teeth include tetracycline, oxytetracycline, chlortetracycline and doxycycline.

Malocclusions:

In addition to retained puppy fangs and fangs broken in accidents, the most common dental problem are misaligned teeth or malocclusion.

Often the lower jaw protrudes somewhat beyond the upper one so that the anterior teeth of the lower and upper jaws do not touch.

This is not a painful condition and dogs with severe overbite should not be bred.

Even though the lower fangs may erode the upper gums initially, the teeth soon shift on their own preventing irritation.

Serious health problems caused by tooth problems.

Leaving bad breath aside, dental disease is a serious problem for your dog.

This is because bacteria that accumulate just under the gum line frequently break loose in clumps that enter the blood stream.

From there, they lodge on the valves of the heart or within the filtering apparatus of the kidneys and liver where they can cause irreversible damage and scarring.

Canned / cooked vs. dry foods.

Dogs that eat canned food or primarily table foods usually have the most tooth and gum problems.

Most dogs prefer canned diets and table foods over crunchy pellets/kibble.

*If I was a dog I would too.*

But the soft foods cling to the nooks and crannies between the teeth and at the gum line and do not massage the gums or wear away plaque as they are chewed or just gulped down.

As much as dogs enjoy soft foods it is really a disservice to feed these products to them.

Dry dog feeds have an abrasive crunchy action when they are eaten and aid in keeping the teeth and mouth cleaner and minimizing periodontal disease.

For reasons that elude me, dental formulated dog diets are often prescription items.

Some of these are formed into large, abrasive kibble that help clean the teeth.

Others contain enzymes that help dissolve plaque.

Sticks and bones.

Dogs that chew on sticks and bones and rubber tyres have very clean teeth. However, they often wear their teeth down until the root canals are exposed.

Unlike humans, it is very rare for dogs with worn teeth to have any problems or evidence of pain.

The exception is the fourth upper premolar or carnassial tooth.

These two teeth do 90 percent of the animal's chewing when this tooth has a crack in it that extends below the gum line, an abscess forms just below the eye.

Extracting this tooth cures this condition.

Removing the bad tooth cures this condition as well.

## Brushing your dog's teeth.



Your dog relies on you for dental care.

Dry food and chew toys and meaty bones help but they do not entirely remove tartar at the gum line where dental problems begin.

Using a soft, paediatric toothbrush or finger brush and toothpaste designed for dogs will help prevent dental disease.

Most dogs accept the taste of these toothpastes readily.

Although dogs are not naturally fond of having their teeth brushed, it is important to start the tooth brushing routine between 3-6 months of age.

Start by simply massaging your dog's lips and mouth with your fingers – then give a treat.

When the dog is used to this, get them accustomed to having their lips and teeth rubbed.

If your dog has a difficult time getting used to having its teeth brushed, you can clean only its front teeth and gradually include the back teeth.

Place a little of the toothpaste on your fingers as you do this.

Most of the tartar (80%) forms on the outer (buccal) surface of the teeth so you do not need to spend large amounts of time cleaning the inner surfaces.

Concentrate on the rear teeth and the base of the canine teeth (fangs).

Begin brushing for very short periods - very gently and very slowly.

When you are done, give a treat for being a good patient.

Proceed longer and more thoroughly gradually from day to day and stop when your dog begins to squirm or show resentment.

Within a few weeks you should be able to do a rather thorough job. A good time to brush their teeth is first thing in the morning. Some dogs by nature resent tooth brushing more than others. Difficult dogs will have to rely more on Vet hospital cleaning and specialty diets and treats.

### **Professional Vet tooth cleaning.**

Even with brushing it may still be necessary for you to have your dog's teeth cleaned every year or so by a veterinarian.

They use tartar scrapers and an ultrasonic cleaning machine called a Cavitron.

A few dogs are so docile that this can be done without anaesthesia. But most pets need a low dose of dissociative aesthetic to help them tolerate the whine of the machine and manipulation.

Pay careful attention to have all the tartar removed from below the gum line. This is the tartar that causes the gums to recede.

Enamel covers only the crown of the tooth.

Once the gums have receded enough to expose the softer dentin, tarter build-up accelerates.

After such a cleaning your vet might place the patient on a two-week course of doxycycline antibiotic to encourage the gums to regrow.

*Doxycycline oral patches are also available.*

If the gums have receded so much that the tooth is loose in its socket or one can pass a probe between a multi-rooted teeth - the tooth is best extracted.

Dogs do excellently with few or even with no teeth.

Complex dental work especially the large canine teeth (fangs) is possible on dogs.

You might consider this with a high ability show or hunting or guard dogs.

When over 50% of the supporting ligaments and bone that anchor a tooth is lost it is best to have the tooth I extract them.

I believe that complex dental work primarily satisfy the owner's sensibilities rather than the dog's needs.

Your dog's teeth are anchored to the bones of the face by ligaments, cementum and the bones of the mandible and maxilla.

More than ninety percent of dogs over six years of age have some degree of periodontal disease.

It begins with the formation of plaque composed of food particles and bacteria.

At its onset, plaque is clear, fluid and sticky.

Then, minerals in the dog's saliva work to harden this plaque into calculus.

Bacteria residing in this calculus produce acids that dissolve away the tooth's supporting structure and lead to inflammation of the gums.

### **Dental chews for dogs.**

There are many on the market.

Some contain fluoride help keep your dog's teeth and gums in a clean and healthy condition.

If the toys / chews have a tough texture they'll remove the plaque.

An inexpensive alternative to a chew toy from a pet store is to give your dog a rope or tennis ball to chew on.

Just be sure that when buying chew toys you don't select one that is too hard (some especially made for APBT) or your dog could fracture its teeth.

Rawhide bones.

Dogs love them and they do an excellent job of massaging the gums and removing soft tartar. Just supervise them nor so they don't swallow sections when wet – might lead to health problems even death.

Pig Ears and Hooves.

They are also excellent for dental hygiene.

Nylabone dental chew balls.

Nylabone dental chew balls come in a variety of sizes that help fight plaque and tartar build-up.

Just like any dental chew monitor the dog fighting this chew.

Nylabones last a long time.

They have raised dental tips to massage your dog's teeth and gums while attacking plaque and tartar build up.

Raw meaty bone.

This a natural for the carnivores dog - in the same category as bover chews – remove after the meat and sinuses are eater of.

Breath spray.

“Petrodex” pet breath spray contains a non-foaming formula that is said to help control offensive mouth odours.