

Your Pet's Dental Health

Between 4 and 7 months of age, baby teeth are lost and replaced with permanent teeth. It is a good idea to introduce your puppy (especially small breed dogs) or kitten to brushing early in life. Once or twice a week, use dog toothpaste or baking soda and water on a child's toothbrush, gauze pad or fingerbrush, and gently rub the teeth for a few minutes. Veterinarians can also clean teeth as a regular part of your dog's health program.

Dental disease, or periodontal disease, is common in middle-aged and older cats and dogs, affecting 85% of adult pets. Plaque is formed within hours of a meal and mineralises into calculus. This irritates the gums. This first stage of dental disease is gingivitis, a reddening along the gumline, that progresses to swelling and bleeding gums if probed. More severe disease, such as pockets of infection between the tooth and the gum, can lead to abscesses and loss of surrounding bone. Bacteria in the mouth may gain entrance to the general circulation through the inflamed gums and set up infection elsewhere in the body, which may lead to heart disease (e.g. valvular insufficiency) and kidney failure.

Animals that are considered to be particularly at risk are toy breeds, pets that are ill for any reason, have poor nutrition, or crowded teeth. Plaque and calculus are visible on the surface of teeth. Most often, owners will notice their pet has smelly breath, also known as halitosis, or dragon breath (some breath odors may be indicative of other chronic health problems such as liver or intestinal disease, diabetes, or kidney disease). If you require a gas mask to look your dog or cat in the face it's too late to simply brush the teeth. Unfortunately this is when most animals come to the vet clinic for a dental and they usually require some extractions.

In order to maintain your pet's teeth in good health, regular care is required. The Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic (DCVC) has trained professionals that are trained and licenced to perform prophylactic cleaning (to prevent disease) or periodontal therapy (treatment of current disease). Dental cleaning or therapy requires placing your pet under general anesthesia to protect the delicate tissue of the gum from tearing due to sudden movement when a dental instrument is placed against the tooth. Unfortunately they don't hold their mouth open when we ask them to. Under anesthesia, the teeth are thoroughly examined, scaled using an ultrasonic and a hand scaler to remove plaque and calculus that has built up. They are then polished and rinsed, providing a smooth tooth surface to discourage plaque formation. Finally, fluoride is applied for future tooth protection. Teeth may need to be extracted if the dental disease is severe. In the near future, DCVC will be able to provide dental x-rays and perform root canals.

Initially after your pet's teeth have been cleaned, their mouth may be tender. Anti-inflammatory pain killers are administered at the DCVC to increase your pets' comfort. Soft food can also be fed for a couple days. Depending on the extent of dental disease, antibiotics may be prescribed to prevent an infection.

There are a few things you can do to help prevent dental disease from re-occurring. Regular tooth brushing (3-4 times per week) with specially made pet toothpaste will remove plaque, preventing calculus from forming. If your pet will not tolerate this, there are products that can be added to your pet's drinking water or gels that can be applied directly to the teeth that also help stop dental disease from developing. In addition, there are some diets that are specifically designed to improve dental health by physically shearing off plaque from teeth when the animal bites into it. A veterinarian can recommend the one best suited to your pet. Avoid table scraps and leaving his/her food out all day, as this promotes dental disease.

February is dental health month at the DCVC. Feel free to call or drop into the clinic to find out about our promotions during dental health month.