



### **February is National Pet Dental Month**

That means it's time to look at Fang's fangs!

If you hate going to the dentist, you might suppose your pet does too.

But a dental exam is part of every well vet visit because just like you, your pets develop tartar and plaque buildup if their teeth aren't cleaned regularly. That can progress to gingivitis (inflammation of the gums), periodontal disease (chronic infection of the gums), and bone loss or fracture.

Our 4-legged furballs can't tell us when they have a toothache, so they rely on us to notice—and we might not until the problem is severe and super painful.

Dogs are likely to keep right on chowing down even if a tooth is broken or infected. They'll often use the other side of their mouths to chew or just swallow their grub in larger chunks, leading us to think everything is fine. This can be dangerous because overlooked dental disorders in dogs have been linked to heart, liver, and kidney complications.

Cats may drool, turn their head sideways as they eat, or stop eating altogether, leading to weight loss. Plus they get irritable and ornery when they're in pain—just like we do.

And exactly like in humans, untreated dental disease can progress to cavities, abscesses, and in rare cases, even sepsis.

But here's the good news: When *you* get your teeth cleaned, you may flinch from the cold spray of the ultrasonic scaler or sharp instruments scraping your sensitive gums. But if your vet recommends a cleaning for your furry companion, they won't feel a thing.

Your pet will sleep through the whole procedure. Anesthesia for dental care is safe and is commonly used. It allows your veterinarian to get x-rays, do a thorough cleaning, and treat any unhealthy teeth they find.

### How do you know if your pet needs dental care?

Short of learning how to speak "dog" and "cat," or studying them closely while they eat, dogs tend to pant in our faces. "Doggy breath" can be a household joke, but unless your pup is eating garlic or onions—which they should *never* do—his breath shouldn't knock you over. For cats, smelling their mouths may be more of a challenge. They're pretty much obligate nose-breathers, meaning they keep their mouths closed most of the time, so you may not notice a nasty odor—unless your mouser is like mine and likes to lick your face.

But between vet visits, if you have a trusting relationship with your companion, you could make a monthly habit of pulling their lips back and checking out their teeth, especially the ones in the rear. If the teeth look yellow or dark or if the gums are red, swollen, or receding from the tooth line, it's time to bring your little guy in even if it's ahead of schedule.

### Prevention Between Vet Visits

Brush their teeth. Really.

You can either buy a specifically designed "finger" brush or a special doggy toothbrush. You can even use a child's toothbrush for large dogs, or a baby's toothbrush for cats. But always make sure the brush you buy is tiny enough to comfortably fit in your animal's mouth and *always* get the soft bristles.

Are you worried your cat or dog isn't going to open up and say "ah?" Introducing anything new to your nonverbal family should be done slowly. Starting at a young age makes it easier, but you can get your older pets to cooperate too. Let them examine the toothbrush and sample the toothpaste before you put it in their mouth. Be patient and don't force anything until they're ready.

**NEVER** use human toothpaste on a dog's or cat's teeth. Most of these contain ingredients that are toxic to our furry friends.

That's so important, I'm going to repeat it.

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Your vet can recommend the best toothpaste for your pet, and your local or online pet shops carry tailor-made formulas designed for your tail-wagging—or tail-swishing buddies.

Even if *you* hate getting your teeth tended to, don't you love that fresh, clean feeling once it's over?

Give your pet pal a gift—they'll thank you!