Healthy Teeth, Happy Pets: A Guide to Dental Hygiene in Dogs and Cats

Tanaya Ponkshe[1], Loukik Raut[2]* and Sharvari Patil[3]

[1]*Department of Veterinary Pharmacology & Toxicology, College of Veterinary Science and Animal Husbandry, Kamdhenu University, Anand, Gujarat, 388001, India*
[2]*Department of Animal Nutrition, College of Veterinary Science and Animal Husbandry, Kamdhenu University, Anand, Gujarat, 388001, India*
[3]*Veterinary Practitioner, B.Sc. (Microbiology), B.V.Sc. & A.H., Mumbai, 400088, India*

Corresponding Author
Loukik Raut
Email: loukikraut10@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

A wagging tail, a playful purr and a happy face are some of the little things that make sharing our lives with pets so special. But how often do we think about the health of their teeth and gums? Dental care is an essential part of keeping our dogs and cats healthy, yet it is often overlooked until bad breath, difficulty eating or other visible problems appear. Just like humans, dogs and cats need regular dental care. Poor oral hygiene can lead to plaque and tartar accumulation, inflamed gums, loose teeth and painful dental disease. In advanced cases, infections may extend beyond the mouth and affect other organs of the body. Dental disease is common in pets and can progress without obvious signs of discomfort. This is particularly concerning because animals may continue eating and behaving relatively normally even when their mouths are painful. The good news? With regular home care, appropriate dental products and routine veterinary check-ups, pet owners can take important steps to protect their companions' oral health.

INTRODUCTION:

1. Understanding how dental disease develops

Dental disease often begins with a thin, sticky film called **plaque**, which forms on the teeth after eating. Plaque contains bacteria mixed with food particles and saliva. When it is not removed regularly, it can harden into **tartar**, also known as calculus, particularly along the gum-line.

The accumulation of plaque and tartar can irritate the gums, causing a condition called **gingivitis**. The gums may become red, swollen and prone to bleeding. If the disease progresses, the tissues and bone supporting the teeth may become damaged, eventually leading to lose teeth and tooth loss. This more advanced form of disease is commonly associated with periodontal disease.

Dental disease is not simply a cosmetic problem. It can cause persistent pain, discomfort while eating and oral infections. These infections may sometimes spread beyond the mouth and affect organs such as the heart, liver or kidneys. Some dogs, particularly small and flat-faced breeds, may be more prone to dental problems because of the shape and spacing of their teeth. Cats also require regular dental attention and can develop painful oral conditions that are difficult for owners to detect at home. Recognising the problem early is therefore much better than waiting for symptoms to become obvious.

2. Warning signs every pet owner should know

Because dogs and cats cannot tell us when their teeth hurt, pet owners need to watch for changes in their behaviour and eating habits.

Common warning signs include:

- **Persistent bad breath:** An unpleasant smell from the mouth may indicate plaque accumulation or dental disease.
- **Red, swollen or bleeding gums:** These may be signs of gingivitis or other oral problems.
- **Yellow or brown deposits on teeth:** Visible deposits, particularly near the gum-line, may indicate tartar build-up.
- **Difficulty eating:** Your pet may chew slowly, drop food, favour one side of the mouth or hesitate before eating.
- **Drooling or pawing at the mouth:** These behaviours may indicate oral discomfort.
- **Loose, broken or missing teeth:** These require veterinary assessment.
- **Changes in behaviour:** Irritability, reduced playfulness or reluctance to have the face touched may sometimes accompany dental pain.

Some animals continue eating even when they have significant dental problems. Therefore, a normal appetite does not necessarily mean that the mouth is healthy.

When should you consult a veterinarian?

Seek veterinary advice if you notice persistent bad breath, bleeding gums, difficulty eating, facial swelling or any other concerning change. A sudden inability to eat or severe oral pain warrants prompt attention.

3. Brushing: The foundation of dental hygiene

Among the different methods of maintaining oral hygiene, **regular toothbrushing is considered the gold standard for preventing plaque accumulation**. We recommend daily

brushing and introducing the process gradually, particularly in cats.

Here are how pet owners can make brushing easier.

Step 1: Start slowly. Choose a calm time when your pet is relaxed. Allow your dog or cat to become comfortable with having its muzzle and lips gently touched.

Step 2: Introduce the taste of pet toothpaste. Let your pet lick a small amount of toothpaste formulated specifically for animals.

Step 3: Choose the right toothbrush. Use a toothbrush designed for dogs or cats, or another suitable pet dental brush recommended by your veterinarian.

Step 4: Begin gently. Lift the lips and brush a few teeth at a time, concentrating on the outer surfaces and the gum-line. Use gentle movements rather than scrubbing forcefully.

Step 5: Build a routine. Start with short sessions and gradually increase the duration as your pet becomes comfortable. Aim to brush daily. Never force your pet through the process if it becomes distressed. If the mouth is painful or your pet strongly resists, consult a veterinarian before continuing.

An important precaution: Never use human toothpaste

Human toothpaste is not formulated for pets and may contain ingredients that are unsafe for them to swallow. Always use a toothpaste specifically formulated for dogs or cats. Patience and consistency are more important than trying to complete a long brushing session on the first day. A few calm, positive experiences can help establish a lasting routine.

4. What if your pet refuses to have its teeth brushed?

Some pets readily accept brushing, while others need considerable time to adjust. Cats, in particular, may be difficult to train. However, brushing is not the only option available for supporting oral hygiene. Specially designed dental chews can help reduce plaque through mechanical contact with the teeth. Choose products appropriate for your pet's species, size and chewing habits. Certain specially formulated diets use kibble size, texture or other features to help reduce plaque and tartar. Not every ordinary dry food provides the same dental benefits.

Some products are designed to help control plaque or tartar when added to drinking water. Use only products intended for the relevant species and according to their directions. Your veterinarian can help you select products suitable for your pet. These alternatives can be useful additions to a dental-care routine, but they should not be assumed to replace brushing or professional treatment when these are needed.

5. Professional dental cleaning: Why home care is not always enough

Even with regular brushing and appropriate dental products, pets may develop dental problems that require professional attention. A veterinary dental examination helps identify conditions that may not be visible during a routine look inside the mouth. Depending on the animal's condition, the veterinarian may recommend a professional dental cleaning. Professional cleaning generally involves general anaesthesia. This allows the veterinary team to examine the mouth thoroughly, clean the teeth above and below the gum-line, assess the teeth and surrounding tissues, and take dental X-rays when indicated.

Why is cleaning below the gum-line important? Dental disease can damage the

structures supporting the teeth beneath the visible gum surface. Simply removing the visible yellow or brown deposits may leave significant disease undetected. During the procedure, the veterinarian may discover fractured teeth, advanced periodontal disease or other painful conditions that require additional treatment, such as extraction or specialised dental care. Although anaesthesia requires careful assessment and monitoring, professional cleaning allows a more thorough examination and treatment than an awake cosmetic cleaning. The veterinary team will determine the appropriate precautions based on the individual animal's health.

How often should pets undergo professional cleaning?

There is no single schedule suitable for every dog and cat. The frequency depends on factors such as age, breed, oral health, susceptibility to dental disease and the effectiveness of home care. Small and flat-faced dogs may need more frequent attention, and cats with existing dental problems may require closer monitoring. Regular veterinary examinations help determine when cleaning is necessary.

6. Common mistakes to avoid

A few well-intentioned habits can undermine your pet's dental health.

- **Ignoring bad breath:** Persistent bad breath should not automatically be dismissed as normal.
- **Brushing only when teeth look dirty:** Plaque can form before visible tartar appears, so regular care is preferable to occasional cleaning.
- **Using human toothpaste:** Always select a pet-specific formulation.
- **Relying exclusively on dental treats:** Chews and other products may help, but they do not guarantee that all teeth and gum surfaces remain healthy.
- **Trying to scrape tartar off at home:** Improper tools or techniques can injure the mouth and may fail to address disease below the gum-line.
- **Skipping veterinary examinations:** Problems hidden beneath the gums may go unnoticed without professional assessment.
- **Forcing brushing:** A gentle, gradual approach helps build acceptance and reduces stress.

If your pet already has substantial tartar, inflamed gums or painful teeth, ask your veterinarian to assess the mouth before beginning or intensifying home brushing.

Conclusion: Small habits can make a big difference

Dental hygiene is an important part of responsible pet ownership. Healthy teeth and gums support comfortable eating, help prevent avoidable pain and contribute to overall well-being. The most useful approach is to combine daily tooth brushing where possible, suitable veterinary-approved dental products, regular oral examinations and professional cleaning when recommended. Starting early can make these habits easier to establish, but it is never too late to discuss a dental-care plan for an adult or senior pet.

Our dogs and cats depend on us to recognise the problems they cannot explain. By paying attention to their mouths and making dental care part of their regular routine, we can help them enjoy a healthier, more comfortable life.

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