

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



TEETH CARE



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Dental disease is very common in cats. Surveys show that after the age of three years, about seven out of ten cats have some kind of tooth disorder which left unattended may cause irreversible damage. Stopping the build up of plaque can prevent dental disease.





How do I know if my cat has tooth disease?

Plaque is a deposit of bacteria and debris on the surface of the teeth. In time it hardens to become yellowish brown tartar (or 'calculus') usually starting from the base of the tooth and spreading over the surface. As well as the visible tartar there may be bad breath and signs of pain and discomfort such as head shaking and pawing at the mouth. Your cat may be slow to eat, drop food or back away from the food bowl. However, other illnesses such as kidney disease can cause mouth pain and for this reason your vet may want to take a blood test.

How does dental disease affect my cat's health?

The tartar hidden below the gum line is the main cause of problems. It contains bacteria that will attack the surrounding gum tissue causing painful inflammation ('gingivitis') and infection tracking down to the tooth roots. This wears away tissue from the tooth socket and eventually loosens the teeth. Sometimes an abscess will form and there is a risk that bacteria may enter the blood stream and cause damage in organs such as the kidneys, heart and liver.

My vet mentioned 'neck lesions'...

These are holes, often at the gum line, which are very painful. They spread into the tooth and root and can only be treated by removal of the tooth. The cause is unknown, but some cats seem prone to them.

How can dental disease be treated?

A general anaesthetic will be needed – without this your pet will not keep still. Many pets with advanced dental disease are elderly but, even so, with modern anaesthetic techniques, the risk is small. Leaving dentistry ‘until next year’ just means that your pet will get older.

First your vet will remove tartar with an ultrasonic scaling machine. Then loose teeth and those with neck lesions will be taken out. X-rays may be needed to check for root damage. The roots of cats’ teeth are very firmly attached to the jawbone and it is not always possible to remove the entire root. Finally, the teeth are polished to leave a smooth surface. Then you will need to start home care to slow tartar formation and take your pet for regular check-ups at the vet.

How many teeth will my pet have to have out?

It is not possible to tell until your cat has had a thorough examination under anaesthetic. Don’t worry! Even if your pet has a lot of teeth removed, it will still be able to eat normally within a few days.

Will a change in diet help control dental disease?

In the wild your cat’s teeth would be much cleaner because its food would be tougher than modern petfood. Ask your vet about giving dental chews to your cat. Look for a chew that is ‘chewy’ – tough and fibrous, rather than hard. Do not give bones! You can also get diets that contain things to slow up plaque accumulation.



Brush your cat's teeth daily to keep them clean

Brushing is the most effective way to keep your pet's teeth clean. Ideally your cat should get used to having its teeth cleaned from an early age. Wrap a piece of soft gauze around your finger and gently rub the cat's teeth at first. Do not open the mouth – slide your finger in at the side. Then move on to using a toothbrush specially designed for cats or try a toothbrush that fits over the end of your finger. Dip it in something tasty, such as liquid from a can of tuna to start with, then ask your vet about suitably flavoured toothpaste. Do not attempt to use human toothpaste as this is not meant to be swallowed and can do harm.

Brushing the outside of the teeth alone is usually enough, but do the inside if your cat will let you.

What if my cat doesn't like having its teeth brushed?

Be patient and keep trying – some brushing is better than none at all. There are also mouthwashes and antibacterial gels that can help reduce plaque deposits. Chews or a special diet can help, but brushing is best. You need to do something or plaque accumulation will continue despite dentistry.

My cat had dentistry a few months ago, but now its mouth is really sore again...

Unfortunately, cats are very prone to gingivitis (a sore mouth). This is often viral and is a lifelong infection. It usually needs repeated courses of medication to keep it under control. Dirty teeth certainly don't help and while cleaning or removal of the teeth can relieve some cases, the only way to find out is to do dentistry and see whether there is an improvement. Sadly, some cases are recurrent.



Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.



This leaflet was produced in association with Vetstream Ltd

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Registered charity no: 224392