

The Perils of Periodontal Disease

Just like you, your dog needs its teeth brushed every day.

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More than just morning breath, bad breath in your dog serves as a red warning flag. Something is wrong in your dog's mouth, and the most likely culprit is periodontal disease. Experts estimate that more than 80 percent of domestic dogs older than 3 years suffer from periodontal disease, which includes plaque and tartar (calculus) buildup, gingivitis, gingival (gum) recession and pocketing, jawbone damage and, ultimately, tooth loss.

The repercussions of periodontal disease extend beyond mere aesthetics. Bacteria that cause gingivitis can enter a dog's bloodstream and produce serious disease in vital organs such as the heart, lungs, kidneys and liver. Unfortunately, most pet owners don't spend a lot of time looking in their dogs' mouths, and they may not realize a problem exists until periodontal disease is quite advanced.

Until recently, conventional wisdom said the absence of a wild-type diet - including hard bones and stringy tendons to help clean teeth naturally contributed to periodontal disease in domestic dogs. But a study by Dr. Cecilia Gorrell, published last year in the proceedings of a veterinary conference, dispels the myth that wild canines do not suffer from periodontal disease. Dogs that chew harder foods may build up plaque and tartar more slowly, but a crunchy diet alone will not prevent periodontal disease.

Owners play a critical role in ensuring their pets' oral health, said Milinda Lommer, DVM, who is working toward board certification in veterinary dentistry at the University of California, Davis. "The primary reason domestic dogs develop periodontal disease is a lack of care of the teeth at home," she said.

Other contributing factors include genetics and breed conformation, said Kenneth Lyon, DVM, a board-certified veterinary dentist who operates a veterinary dental referral center in Tucson, Ariz. "Short-nosed breeds and toy breeds tend to have crowding of teeth which favors plaque accumulation," he said. "Breeds with long hair around the mouth, such as Schnauzers, or dogs that constantly breathe with their mouths open, like Yorkies, have drier mouths, which also contributes to the problem."

While you can't do much to alter the genetics or anatomy of your dog's mouth, you can and should take an active role in the preventive care of its teeth. "The gold standard for at-home care is daily brushing," said Bill Rosenblad, DVM, veterinary resident in the veterinary dentistry department at the University of Pennsylvania. "It's not enough to just schedule a dental prophylaxis under anesthesia once a year. Without appropriate home care, there will be progression of periodontal disease, with systemic effects and possibly tooth loss."