

Periodontal disease and how to prevent it



Periodontal disease affects the area around the teeth and will eventually lead to tooth loss. Prevent this by brushing your cat's teeth, using the step-by-step guide included here.

Your cat's teeth deserve as much care as your own!

What is periodontal disease?

The periodontium is the structure that surrounds and supports the tooth. It comprises the periodontal ligament - which holds the tooth into the socket - and the gum (gingiva). In periodontal disease, all or part of the periodontal ligament is destroyed and the gum recedes.

How do cats get periodontal disease?

Periodontal disease starts with formation of plaque, the transparent adhesive fluid made up of protein, sloughed cells and bacteria that we remove by cleaning our teeth. Plaque starts forming twelve hours after dental cleaning and, if not removed, reacts with mineral salts in the food to form hard tartar (dental calculus). Calculus irritates the gum, changing the balance of acidity to alkalinity in the mouth and allowing bacteria to grow. By-products of these bacteria "eat away" at the tooth's periodontium leading eventually to loss of the tooth.

The four stages of periodontal disease:

- **Stage 1** (*gingivitis*) - inflammation and possible swelling of the gum line.
- **Stage 2** (*early periodontitis*) - the gum bleeds when prodded and gives less support to the tooth.
- **Stage 3** (*established periodontitis*) - the gum recedes away from the tooth giving even less support.
- **Stage 4** (*advanced periodontitis*) - the tooth begins to wobble.

How is periodontal disease diagnosed?

X-rays of the inside of your cat's mouth give your vet different views of the teeth. Gum examination using a periodontal probe detects any soft tissue changes ("periodontal pockets").

X-rays show areas of bone loss and where pockets are likely to be - but do not show pockets or their depth. If more than half the bone around a tooth has been lost, it is unlikely that the tooth can be saved. The periodontal probe, in addition to showing gum bleeding and inflammation, enables the depth and shape of any pockets to be measured.

How is periodontal disease treated?

Each stage of disease requires different care:

- **Stage 1** (*gingivitis*) - professional teeth cleaning and home care.
- **Stage 2 & 3** (*early & established periodontitis*) - home care and application of an antibiotic gel.
- **Stage 4** (*advanced periodontitis*) - removal of the tooth or gum surgery to reduce the periodontal pocket.

How is periodontal disease prevented?

Tooth brushing is the key to prevention and is an easy process with most small animals:

- **Step 1** (select a cat toothbrush) - many types are available, including a minibrush that fits over your index finger.
- **Step 2** (select a cat toothpaste) - the best ones contain enzymes to help control plaque, and fluoride may be included to help control bacteria. Do not use human toothpastes because they sometimes contain baking soda, detergents or salt.
- **Step 3** (brushing technique) - place the toothpaste between the bristles rather than on top of them - to allow the paste to spend the maximum possible time next to the teeth.

Most pets accept brushing if approached in a gentle manner. Start when they are young, if you can. It's quite easy, but even older pets will accept the process. Start slowly, using a soft cloth to wipe the teeth, front and back, in the same way you will eventually use the toothbrush. Do this twice daily and after about

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two weeks your cat will have become familiar with it all. Then take the toothbrush, soak it in warm water and start brushing twice daily for several days, only adding the toothpaste once your pet accepts this brushing.

Place the toothbrush bristles at the gum edge where the teeth and gum meet and then move the brush in an oval pattern. Be sure to gently force the bristle ends into the area around the base of each tooth and also into the space between teeth. Complete ten short back-and-forth motions, covering three to four teeth at a time. Then move the brush to a new location. Pay most attention to the outside of the upper teeth.

Conclusion

Tooth brushing from an early age will ensure that your cat becomes used to it and is happy to have it done. It will keep plaque from forming and keep periodontal disease at bay. It will save your cat from tooth decay, toothache and eventual loss of teeth. Just as important, it will also prevent the bad breath often associated with decaying teeth.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact Dalehead Veterinary Group on (01729) 823538 and we will be happy to advise you.