

Dental Disease: Causes, Conditions and How to prevent them

Causes of dental disease

Unfortunately, dental disease is a very common problem in dogs and cats and can be mainly due to:

- **Poor dental hygiene** – A lack of tooth brushing.
- **Age** – Dental disease is common in older animals due to wear and tear.
- **Breed** – Some breeds are prone to dental disease for example;

Dogs; Toy Poodles, Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, Greyhounds, King Charles Spaniels.

Cats; Persian, Siamese, British Short Hair.

- **Diet** – Having a poor-quality diet or having a fully wet based food/majority wet based diet. Having dry biscuits/kibble as part of your pet's diet may improve oral health.
- **Retained baby teeth** – your pet's baby teeth will begin falling out at approximately four months old. This is when their adult teeth start to come through. If their baby teeth don't fall out, this can create teeth overcrowding and effect the positioning of the adult teeth coming through. Therefore the deciduous teeth might need to be removed under anaesthetic.
- **Overcrowding of teeth** – certain breeds may have overcrowding issues due to the size of their mouth being smaller or shorter for example brachycephalic dogs (Bulldogs, Pugs, Boxers). If these teeth are too close together, they are more likely to cause dental disease.
- **Trauma** – a fractured tooth is often extremely painful and can become infected.



Symptoms

Many pets don't show any symptoms of dental disease straight away, so regular checks at home and with your vet are essential. If they do show symptoms they can include:

- **Halitosis (bad breath)**
- **Pain or difficulty eating** i.e. chewing on one side of the mouth
- **Weight loss and decreased appetite**
- **Plaque and tartar** – yellowish brown covering on the teeth
- **Red, inflamed, bleeding gums**
- **Wobbly, missing or broken teeth**
- **Excessive drooling** – sometimes with blood in it
- **Preferring soft food to biscuits**
- **Facial swelling** (can indicate a tooth root abscess)
- **Pawing at/rubbing the mouth/face**

Diagnosis

Your vet will ask if your pet has any symptoms and will examine their mouth. Many animals will be happy to allow an examination of their mouth. This usually doesn't take very long. If

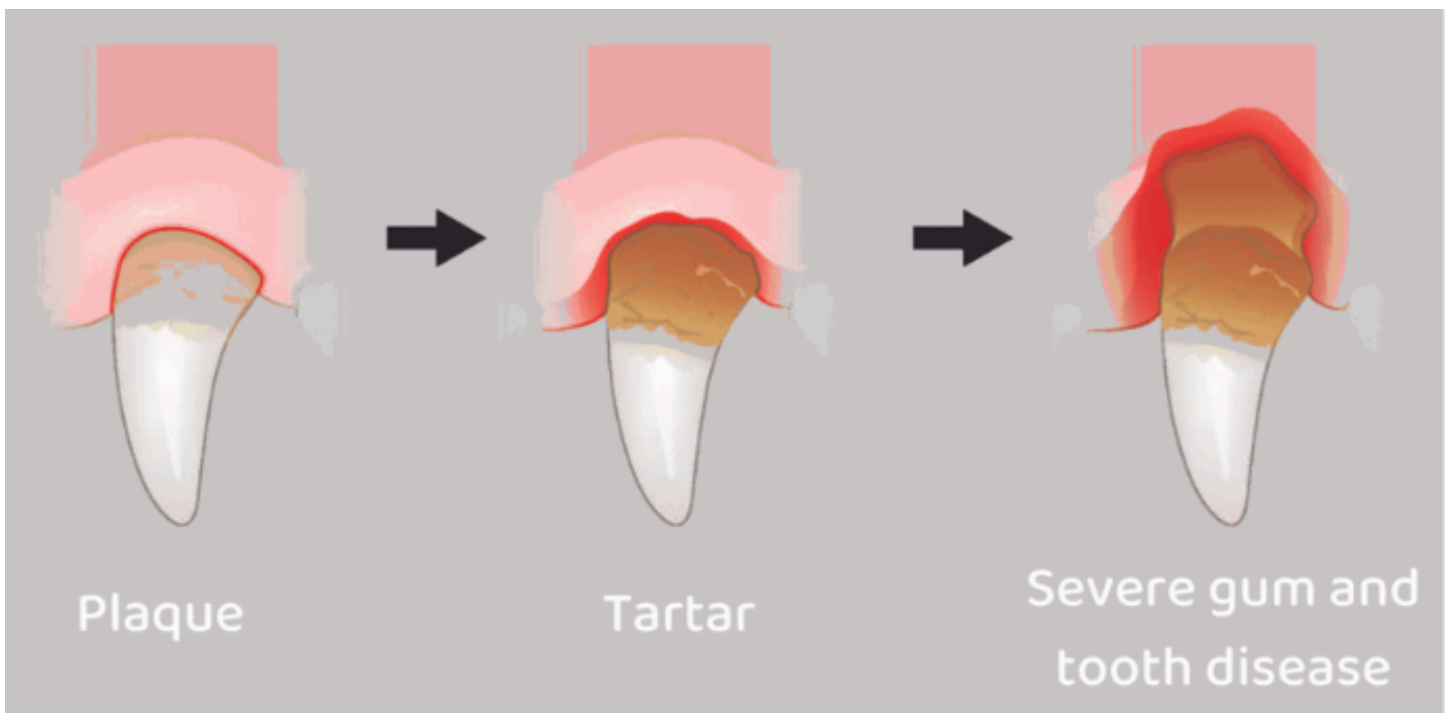
your pet is not happy having their mouth examined, or it is too uncomfortable for them, they may need to have a full check under sedation.

Your vet may also suggest doing dental x-rays. Usually there are further issues under the gum with the roots. Roots are very large in animals; they are often two to three times bigger than the tooth itself. The tooth roots can only be examined by doing x-rays under general anaesthetic.

Common dental problems

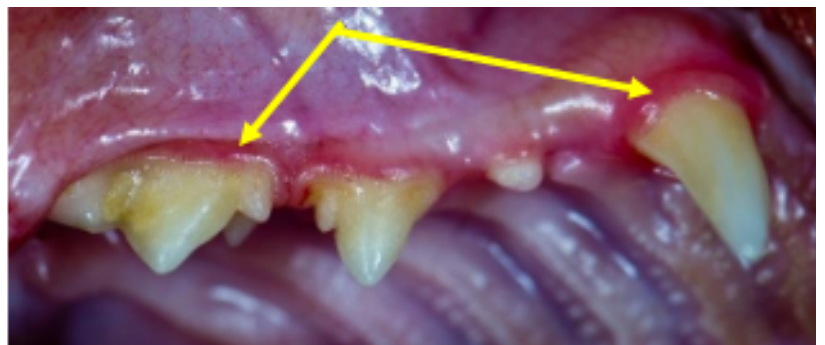
- **Plaque and tartar build up:**

Plaque is a build-up of saliva (spit), food and bacteria; it collects on teeth and eventually turns into a hard, brown substance called tartar. The tartar damages the teeth, causes painful, inflamed gums (gingivitis), cavities, tooth loss and is full of bacteria that can enter the blood and cause problems in the kidneys, heart and liver.



- **Gingivitis (inflamed gums)**

Gingivitis (inflamed gums) is a painful condition usually caused by plaque and tartar build up. It causes the gums to become red, sensitive and bleed easily.



- **A tooth root abscess**

A tooth root abscess is an infection around a tooth root that develops when bacteria get underneath the gum. Tooth root abscesses are very painful and often cause swelling on the side of the face (just under the eye). We can identify these on dental x-rays by lucency around the apex of the tooth root.



- **Cracked or broken teeth**

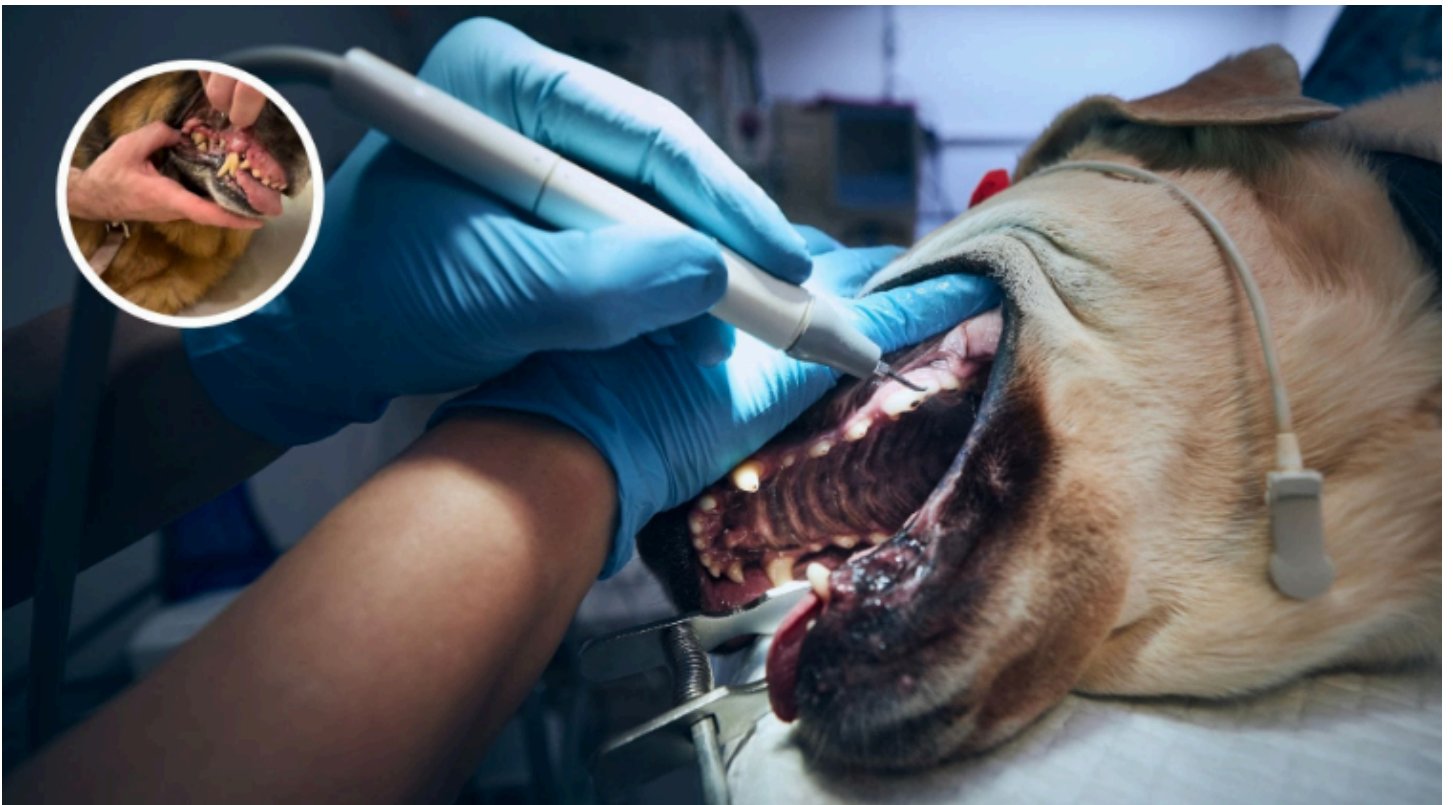
Teeth are very solid and don't break easily. However, if they are weakened by dental disease, or knocked, or an inappropriate chew (e.g. deer antler) is used, they can sometimes crack. Always contact your vet if your dog breaks or cracks a tooth. Damaged teeth are often extremely painful and vulnerable to infection and can cause abscesses as seen above. We advise against feeding your dog bones and other very hard chews because they can cause slab fractures (when a large chunk of tooth breaks off and exposes the inside of the tooth).



Treatment

Treatment for dental disease depends on the specific problem, but is likely to include:

- **A dental procedure** - The only way to safely do this is under general anaesthetic. This can range from a simple scale and polish to tooth/teeth removal. It can be difficult for our vets to estimate how many teeth will need extracting until your pet has a full examination under general anaesthetic, tartar removed and X-rays performed. We can call you once we have done the x-rays and assessment, and determined how many teeth may need extracting, or we can do a “staged dental” when we do the assessment first, and the extractions on a separate occasion.
- **Pain relief** - Our vets may prescribe anti-inflammatory pain relief to make your pet’s mouth more comfortable until a dental can be performed.
- **Long term treatment** - Our nurses will arrange a post op check with you and will discuss suitable aftercare tailored to your pet to prevent any future build-up of plaque. This is likely to include daily teeth brushing once they have healed from their dental procedure.



Prevention

- **Daily tooth brushing**

Brushing away plaque before it turns into solid tartar is the best way to prevent dental disease. Our nurses are more than happy to demonstrate and advise you.

You can buy **pet-safe toothbrushes and toothpaste** for your dog. It’s important to use toothpaste that it is safe for your dog/cat to swallow. The toothpaste contains two enzymes (glucose oxidase and lactoperoxidase) that control bacterial growth; in turn reducing plaque and tartar formation. Together, they help to boost the natural defences of the mouth.

It's a good idea to start brushing your pet's teeth when they're **young** so they get used to it as part of their routine. But it's **never too late** to start and many older dogs will get used to it in time too. The toothpastes are poultry, beef or fish flavoured, so are well-tolerated and are a welcome addition to your cat or dog's dental care routine.



Always use positive reward-based training, take things slowly and get them used to having their teeth cleaned over a few weeks:

1. Make sure your pet is in a quiet, safe place.
2. Introduce the toothbrush or finger brush, letting your pet lick and sniff it.
3. Let them taste their new dog-safe toothpaste so they think of brushing their teeth as a treat, not a chore.
4. Get your pet used to having their mouth touched by gently rubbing a soft cloth along their gums and giving them a reward or praise each time they allow you to do it.
5. Place a small amount of toothpaste on a clean finger, toothbrush or finger brush.
6. Gently rub or brush the toothpaste over all of the surfaces of your pet's teeth and along the gum line.
7. Gradually move on to using a soft finger brush. This will get your pet used to the feeling of their teeth being brushed. When your dog's comfortable you can progress onto a dedicated animal toothbrush.
8. That's it – there's no need to rinse!
9. Always reward your pet with a cuddle afterwards to make it a positive experience.

Daily brushing will significantly reduce the risk of your pet suffering serious problems or requiring frequent general anaesthetics to treat advanced dental disease.

Some pet may not tolerate their teeth being brushed despite going through the steps slowly and using reward-based training. Never put yourself at risk; if your pet is unhappy with you touching their mouth, don't push it.

Although brushing their teeth is the best way to prevent dental disease, there are other ways of looking after their dental hygiene such as regular checks and dental foods, products and toys.

- **Check ups**

Regular dental check ups with your vet will help to identify dental problems quickly. A good time for a check is at their annual vaccination/booster, or 6 month health check.

- **Dental toys and chews**

Encourage your dog to chew on dental toys and chews that help clean the teeth and gums and may help to prevent dental disease. Always supervise your dog with any toy or chew. Lots of the chews are high in calorie so include chews in their daily food allowance to prevent weight gain. These are best used alongside other oral care alternatives. Care must also be taken that the chews are not too hard and could cause dental fractures. A good rule of thumb is that you shouldn't give your dog something to chew on that you can't indent with your own nail.

- **Diet**

Feeding dry biscuits as part of your dog's meal is thought to be better than feeding wet food only because they can physically remove some of the plaque as your dog chews. However, this is not as substitute for brushing your dog's teeth. There are some specific veterinary diets that we can recommend that are designed to help with teeth cleaning, so please speak to the team if you are interested.



- **Mouthwash and antibacterial gels**

Mouthwash and antibacterial gels may help reduce plaque deposits and prevent infection. Special pet-safe mouthwash can be added to your pet's drinking water to help keep their mouth clean. These are best used alongside other oral care alternatives.

- **Powders**

There are various seaweed powders/supplements that you can add to your pet's diet to help with keep plaque softer for longer. These are best used along side other oral care alternatives.

Please understand that teeth brushing is the best recommended way of caring for your pet's oral health, but some of these alternatives are also good options. Please feel free to speak to the team to see what best suit your pet and their specific needs the most.

Cost

Treatment for dental disease can become very expensive, so it's important to speak openly with us about the cost of treatment, your finances, and what you think is right for your pet. Sometimes it can be very hard for the vets to give you an exact estimate as lots of the time we don't know exactly what we are dealing with until we have removed the tartar or performed the X-rays.

Example prices for routine dentistry at Claro Hill Vets:

Cat scale and polish £240

Dog <25kg scale and polish £270

Dog >25kg scale and polish £300

Full mouth x-rays £100

We always recommend taking out insurance as soon as you bring you take your pet home, before any signs of illness start. This will give you peace of mind that you have some financial support if they ever become unwell.

Please be aware some insurance policies may not cover dental treatment or may require you to pay extra to cover it so it's important to always check the terms and conditions before taking out the policy.

To book in for your pet in for a health check please call us on 01423 228080 or visit

www.clarohillvets.co.uk