

Dental disease is one of the most frequent ailments seen and can be seen in the majority of cats over 2 years old. The most common problems are due to periodontal disease, gingivitis and neck lesions (resorptive or odontoclastic lesions). The most common cause of dental disease in cats is due to tartar accumulation. As in humans, cats accumulate bacterial plaque on the tooth's surface which, if not removed, quickly becomes mineralised to form tartar or calculus. The bacterial products and decaying food stuck to the tartar are a cause of bad breath.

Dental Disease...



What signs will I see?

Your cat may have a lack of interest in food, perhaps tending towards soft foods. They may approach the bowl but seem reluctant to eat. They may chew with caution and discomfort, drop food from the mouth, or swallow with difficulty. Dribbling may be seen, possibly with blood and there may be an unpleasant odour to the breath. In some cases the cat may paw at their mouth or shake their heads. With the reluctance to eat the cat may lose weight dramatically. However, it must be said that some animals with terrible mouths show no signs or problems. The veterinary surgeon or nurse will check your cat's mouth regularly and advise on any treatment required.

What can cause dental disease?

Tartar is identified by its light to dark brown colour. It is usually first seen at the gum's edge, particularly on the back teeth but will cover the whole tooth in time. The accumulation of tartar and bacteria on the tooth's surface will lead to infection and gingivitis. If the disease is caught early enough, treatment may allow a full recovery. However, if left untreated, periodontal disease will occur. This is where the bone and ligaments around the tooth are destroyed leading to the loss of the tooth. Infection around the socket causes the formation of pus and a bad odour and then this will spread deeper into the tooth causing painful abscesses or other more severe problems. Once periodontal disease starts, the degenerative changes can't be reversed. These changes encourage more plaque and tartar to collect, so resulting in further disease.

Is gingivitis always associated with dental disease?

A slight degree of redness just below the edge of the gum may be seen as normal in some kittens and adult cats with no sign of dental disease. If you're unsure, please book an appointment with the dental nurse.

Some cats develop severe gingivitis with minimal signs of accompanying dental disease. The affected areas may extend beyond the gums to other areas of the mouth e.g. throat and tongue. The cause of this disease isn't yet known but is likely to be multi-factorial which may differ between individual cases. This condition is often very difficult to control and may require repeated or constant treatment. Accurate diagnosis can involve investigative procedures.

What are neck lesions?

Neck lesions result from a progressive destruction of the tooth substance effectively resulting in slowly deepening holes in the teeth concerned. Once the sensitive parts of the tooth are exposed these lesions are intensely painful and usually the only available treatment is to extract the tooth. The cause of this disease is unknown, however, poor hygiene is suspected to play a role in the disease process.

What if my cat shows signs of dental problems?

If you can see that your cat has evidence of tartar accumulation, gingivitis or is exhibiting any signs of mouth pain or discomfort then you should take them to the veterinary surgeon or dental nurse for a check up. You will be advised on the most appropriate treatment, which may involve looking at the teeth under a general anaesthetic. The rate of tartar accumulation is very variable between cases and some cases may require professional cleaning on a regular basis.

Do not try to remove tartar from the teeth yourself using any form of metallic instrument. Apart from damaging your cat's mouth, or your cat attacking you, you are likely to damage the surface of the tooth by creating tiny scratches which will encourage rapid plaque formation and cause further disease.

What can I do to prevent dental disease in my cat?

In order to prevent dental disease the prime aim is to keep the mouth as hygienic as possible and to reduce the rate at which tartar builds up on the teeth.

The diet should contain foodstuffs that encourage chewing such as dried food. The act of chewing stimulates the production of saliva which contains natural antibacterial substances. The mechanical action helps to scrape plaque and tartar from the teeth. There are now special diets available that will help.

The most effective way of reducing plaque and tartar is to brush the teeth. A number of toothpastes and brushes are available for animal use. With gentleness, patience and perseverance it is possible to clean some cats' teeth. In addition, or as an alternative to brushing if this cannot be achieved, a range of antibacterial mouth washes and gels can be applied to the teeth and mouth to reduce the amount of bacteria. Never use human toothpastes on cats. These are not designed to be regularly swallowed and could cause illness.