

Looking in your own dog or cat's mouth might not be the easiest of tasks, but may reveal a horrendous surprise. That smelly kiss which greets you every morning could be the only indication of long-term mouth disease that has repercussions on the rest of the body.



Dental disease is more common than owners think; up to 85% of dogs and cats over 3 years old may be affected. Severe dental problems result in tooth loss and gum and bone infections, however there are far reaching repercussions with long term disease. Tartar stores a huge amount of bacteria, these easily penetrate the blood stream through inflamed gums and travel around the body. They can damage the heart, liver and kidneys and in some cases trigger disease

The most frequent presenting sign is a smelly breath, and while this is not always due to dental disease, it is certainly the most likely contender. Cats especially may dribble and struggle to close their mouth if a tooth has become loose. Some dogs present with a swelling on the face, which is suggestive of a tooth root abscess.

A common thought is that if the animal is still eating then they cannot have a major problem. This is a misconception as a dog/cat's drive to eat is very strong and they adapt by eating on one side, more slowly or avoiding hard biscuits and chews. Often after a procedure owners report how eager their pet is to eat, despite healing gums, as their mouth is pain free.

Usually diagnosis is made with a conscious examination but, if the pet is very sore, this can be fairly limited. A general anaesthetic enables us to examine the mouth fully, and take x-rays to assess the roots of the teeth. These are sometimes crucial in diagnosing early changes, which can affect treatment. It is then necessary to clean the mouth fully to remove the tartar and bacteria; this often reveals the extent of the damage to the exposed tooth. The mouth is then charted to make a record of any changes. This enables us to check for any progression of damage at further checks. Teeth which need to be removed are then extracted, simply by pulling if loose. The back teeth have several roots, of which only one need be diseased, and these prove more of a headache to remove. They often need dividing into individual roots, and overlying bone burred away to aid in the removal – in large dogs a big procedure. The gums are then closed with dissolvable stitches to ensure food does not get trapped in the extraction holes.

The above process can take several hours in severe cases, so is very rarely a simple 'dental' procedure, and is often reflected in the costs involved.

Crucially, unless home care in the form of brushing/chews or change of diet are instituted, tartar and gum disease rapidly return and the animal is back at square one. Unfortunately certain types of dental problems in cats are progressive, so these cases do need repeat dentals through their lives, but this is not every case.

If you feel your pet is showing any of the signs above, please contact us for a dental check up.