



## Periodontal Disease

We have all heard the old adage “prevention is better than cure”. In fact I’m sure that this was drilled into us when we all visited the dentist as kids. The same adage also holds true when it comes to our pet’s dental care. Most of us brush our teeth at least twice a day after meals, and try to floss as often as our dentists tell us to. Can you imagine what sort of state our teeth would be in if we never brushed our teeth? Well this is the situation that many of our pets find themselves in.

So what exactly is periodontal disease? Periodontal disease refers to disease involving the structures that support the teeth – the gums, the jaw bone and the ligament that holds the teeth in the jaw socket. Periodontal disease is caused by plaque accumulation on the teeth. Plaque accumulates on the teeth when they are not cleaned properly and regularly. Early periodontal disease is totally reversible, whereas the changes that occur with more advanced periodontal diseases are permanent. Unfortunately, these permanent changes can result in long term problems, including recurrent infections, oral pain and tooth loss.

The fact that early periodontal disease is curable and preventable underscores the importance of prevention as well as recognition of the early signs. Astute pet owners will easily be able to recognise these signs. They include bad breath, bleeding from the gum margin, and redness and swelling of the gum margins. If you notice any of these changes, your pet has periodontal disease which can be readily treated (stay with me, we’re getting to treatment and prevention).

Now have you just checked your pet’s mouth and found that they have these changes? Don’t feel bad and don’t think you are alone. According to recent research, a staggering 85% of dogs and cats over one year of age have periodontal disease. It is also the most common infection seen in dogs and cats older than three years of age.

The good news is that preventing periodontal disease is simple and inexpensive. The best and most natural way to prevent periodontal disease is by feeding raw meaty bones. Regular consumption of raw meaty bones provides the teeth with the cleaning and flossing necessary to prevent plaque formation and periodontal disease. It is vital to commence feeding bones to your pet at a young age. Many older pets will not chew bones if they have not been exposed to them as pups or kittens.

Unfortunately raw bones are not suitable for all dogs, and there is no one type of bone that will be suitable for all dogs. I give specific advice to my clients based on the type of dog. Greedy dogs may attempt to swallow bones whole if they think they can manage it, with potentially disastrous consequences. Generally speaking, chicken wings and necks are ok for very small dogs and cats. Larger dogs should be given large shin bones that have been cut into pieces that cannot possibly be swallowed. Dogs like Staffys and Labradors should never be given smaller bones like neck bones, knuckles and T-bones. If in doubt, consult your veterinarian. Never give cooked bones. They are more likely to splinter as well as cause obstructions and severe constipation.

For dogs that cannot or will not chew on a bone there are other options that will also help prevent periodontal disease. Brushing the teeth with your finger or a soft bristled brush can be performed on co-operative pets. This should be done straight after meals. Your veterinarian will be able to supply you with appropriate brushes and toothpaste. Avoid human toothpaste as it foams up too much.

If manual brushing is not an option there are special types of dry food that have been designed to help remove existing plaque as well as prevent plaque from attaching to the teeth. These diets are very effective, but not as effective as raw meaty bones (and more expensive).

For cats and dogs that already have periodontal disease it will not be enough to just start feeding bones or manually cleaning the teeth. These pets will need a dental prophylaxis by your veterinarian to remove plaque and calculus (calcified plaque). This will usually involve manually removing as much plaque and calculus as possible with a hand scaler, followed by an ultrasonic scale and polish. Performing a thorough dental prophylaxis is time consuming and requires a general anaesthetic. As such it is more expensive than when we go to the dentist.

Finally, to end on a bum note, the consequences of untreated periodontal disease can be serious and can extend far from the mouth. Dogs and cats with more advanced periodontal disease have a chronic bacterial infection in their mouth. Not only can this be painful and lead to loss of teeth, these bacteria regularly enter the bloodstream. They may then travel to other parts of the body including the kidney, heart valves and liver causing potentially life threatening infections.

The result of maintaining good dental hygiene is having a happy pet with fresh breath and good overall health and levels of activity.

**Disclaimer:** The advice in this column is of a general nature and should not take the place of professional veterinary consultation.