General Practice Service
Willows Information Sheets

Dental care for
dogs and cats

Willows veterinary centre & referral service
Committed to excellence
Why is it important that I look after my pet’s teeth?

Our pet cats and dogs rely on us to make sure that their teeth and oral health are in good order. They are not able to brush their teeth twice daily and take themselves off to the dentist every 6 months as we do, so we must take care of their teeth for them!

Poor dental hygiene can be a source of chronic (long term) pain and discomfort for many pets. Most owners are unaware of this discomfort because most animals will not cry out in the presence of such pain – they just tolerate it. Dental disease in an older animal can cause ill-thrift which the owner may mistakenly attribute to the animal ‘getting old’.

If there is infection in the mouth it can allow bacteria into the body via the blood stream and cause infections else where. Kidney, heart, lung and liver infections can all be caused by poor oral health. Bad teeth can therefore just be the ‘tip of the iceberg’.
How will I know if my pet has bad teeth?

The first thing to do is to look in your pet’s mouth. Halitosis (bad breath) is caused by bacteria in the mouth, so this may alert you to the presence of dental disease.

Tartar is the hard brown accumulation which occurs on teeth. It is caused by mineralisation of plaque which in turn is caused by bacterial action against food particles in the mouth. The presence of tartar leads to gingivitis (gum inflammation). The gums become red, sore and prone to bleeding when touched. Chronic tartar and gingivitis will eventually lead to periodontal disease – in this condition the inflammation causes infection and destruction of the tissue around the tooth. Affected teeth loosen and may eventually fall out.

If the disease is severe, affected animals may eat on one side of their mouth, lose weight or generally fail to thrive. Older cats especially may start to look rather tatty as they may start to groom themselves less enthusiastically.

When dental disease is suspected the animal should be examined by a vet.

What will the vet be able to see?

A veterinary dental examination will involve a thorough assessment of the mouth and also a general health examination. The patient’s general health will be assessed to make sure that there are no consequences secondary to the dental disease elsewhere in the body, and also to ensure that the patient is well enough for a general anaesthetic, should dental treatment be advised.

The vet will look for tartar and gingivitis. Should this have progressed, periodontal disease may be present, along with gingival recession (where the gum shrinks back from its normal position due to infection).

In some cases the gums over-grow. This so-called ‘hyperplasia’ can be seen secondary to inflammation, but in other instances oral masses may be encountered e.g. epuli (benign gum masses which are common in certain breeds of dog, especially Boxers) and, in some cases, other more serious tumours.

Cats can develop erosions of their teeth called ‘neck lesions’ or ‘feline odontoclastic resorptive lesions’ which are very common and can be very painful. They are caused by the body’s own immune system attacking the enamel of the teeth and causing holes to develop in it. These lesions can be very obvious when they cause broken teeth or in other cases can be rather small and subtle.

Occasionally dogs develop cavities in their molar ‘back’ teeth which are painful and may cause infections.

Some tooth fractures are obvious because a piece of tooth is missing, but in other instances they may be very fine and subtle. Any fractures which extend into the pulp cavity (where the nerve is) will cause pain and eventually tooth-root abscesses. Many dogs have worn teeth due to chewing – these patients need to be carefully assessed as, whilst such teeth may cause no problems, they may be a source of significant pain in some individuals.

Younger pets need to be assessed also. Sometimes temporary (‘milk’) teeth do not fall out at the correct time and so can cause problems for the adult teeth as they come through. In addition, malocclusion – a condition in which the teeth or jaws are not perfectly aligned – is quite common. Generally, malocclusion is just a cosmetic problem, but if the teeth dig into the gum or hard palate it can cause pain and infections.

What can I do to keep my pet’s teeth clean and mouth healthy?

The diet that your pet eats can be very important in preventing tartar build-up on its teeth. In the wild, cats and dogs gnaw on raw bones as part of their diet, and this helps to keep their teeth fairly clean. Indeed, our feline patients who are hunters frequently have less tartar on their teeth than their stay-at-home counterparts!

In terms of commercial diets we tend to recommend good quality dry foods rather than wet (tinned and sachet) foods, as the latter tend to stick to the teeth, allowing the rapid build-up of tartar. Some diets are especially designed to help to clean the teeth by using increased...
kibble size and a texture which scrapes down the tooth rather than just breaking up, as a conventional biscuit might. Other biscuits have enzymes which reduce plaque (a precursor to tartar). If you are considering changing your pet’s diet, please speak to your vet first. Diet changes must be undertaken very gradually, especially moving adult cats over to dry food when they have been used to a wet diet only. Some animals may have conditions where dry food or altering diets may not be appropriate. (See Cat nutrition information sheet and Dog nutrition information sheet)

Dental chews can be extremely helpful and convenient, especially for dogs. Cats generally are not too interested in chews, although there are some available. With any chews you should take care that they are not too rich – some dogs can get upset tummies if they have chews too frequently. It is important to get a chew which is appropriate to the size of your pet. If they are too big, they may be difficult to ‘deal with’ and if too small, the pet will chomp through them too quickly and not reap the benefit. We do not recommend that dogs chew on bones – cooked bones are especially prone to splintering and causing damage to the gut. Even raw bones can cause gut problems and, although they tend to keep tartar off the teeth, they can chip the enamel and cause dental fractures.

Tooth brushing is the best way of keeping the teeth clean. Both cats and dogs will generally allow tooth brushing, especially if it is started as a routine at an early age. It is very important to use a pet toothpaste. Human toothpaste is bad for animals and in addition most animals really enjoy the flavours of pet tooth paste – usually yummy malt, fish or poultry!! You can brush with baby finger brushes or a child’s tooth brush. Do not start cleaning your pet’s teeth while there is gingivitis present, as this will be sore and create an aversion to this procedure in the future. Seek veterinary dental treatment first and then start when the inflammation has settled down.

Some mouth washes are available for pets. Where the pet is compliant, these antibacterial washes reduce bacterial load, so reducing the ability of bacteria to create plaque or form bacterial toxins which can cause inflammation.

Regular check ups with your veterinary surgeon are essential for your pet’s oral health. Your pet’s mouth will be examined as part of any routine examination and health check.

Some dogs can be a little shy of their mouth being opened. A general oral examination should be part of your general puppy training (along with looking in the ears and looking at the feet – all sensitive areas) to get your dog used to this type of handling.

Should your pet require specific dental therapy, more information is available on our Dental treatment information sheet.

A guide to tooth brushing can be found at www.petsmile.org.

If you have any concerns about your pet’s oral health, please do not hesitate to contact us.