

A guide to your dog's dental procedure

Dental disease is very common in dogs - recent surveys show that it affects more than three-quarters of dogs over four years old.

Dental disease usually begins with a plaque deposit on the teeth (as with humans). This hardens to form tartar, which can be seen as a yellow-brown deposit on the tooth, beginning at the base of the tooth and gradually spreading to cover the entire tooth. As tartar forms it will spread beneath the gum line, allowing bacteria to encroach and causing an infection known as gingivitis.

If the infection travels deeper, into the area called the periodontal membrane (the 'glue' that holds the tooth in its socket) then the infection is termed periodontitis. Gingivitis is reversible, but periodontitis is not and usually requires the removal of the tooth.

What are the signs of tooth disease?

Tartar can be seen quite easily and will often cause foul breath, although it does not cause the animal problems until it develops into painful gingivitis. Dogs will then have problems chewing with the affected teeth, leading to a vicious cycle of disease where the affected teeth are not being used to chew, therefore they are not being cleaned and so further tartar builds up.

The gums will bleed easily, and in advanced stages dogs will find it impossible to eat and can often dribble constantly. Just like us, dogs also may occasionally get rotten teeth (caries).

How does dental disease affect general health?

As well as the obvious pain and discomfort associated with dental disease, your dog's immune system is having to constantly fight infection, and over time your dog can become run down. Infections can track into the gums causing painful root abscesses. Also, as the dog chews, some bacteria will be released into the blood stream and this can affect the kidneys, heart and liver. Recent surveys in older dogs suggest that chronic gum disease can reduce your dog's lifespan by up to 2 or 3 years as a result.

What will happen during my dog's dental procedure?

Antibiotics may be prescribed for a couple of days before the procedure, to allow them to build up in your dog's system. These will then continue for several days afterwards to kill off all the infection in the gums.

On admission, your dog will be given a general anaesthetic to avoid distress. An ultrasonic scaler is used to remove tartar from the teeth and a probe assesses whether gum disease extends down into the periodontal membrane. If periodontitis is present, the tooth will need to be extracted. Most teeth with caries also need extraction, as do any that are broken or loose.

Due to the size of their roots, canines and molars may need to be surgically extracted. An incision will be made over the gum, some of the bone drilled away and the tooth extracted 'sideways'.

Any stitches will dissolve without the need for later removal. As an alternative to extraction we offer root canal treatment in suitable cases. If we feel your dog is a suitable candidate we will discuss this, and relevant costs with you. After your dog's teeth have been scaled they will then be polished to leave a smooth surface, which will slow down the build up of plaque in the future.

After the dental procedure.

Unfortunately dogs with dental disease tend to have recurring problems. Our nurses will speak to you about diet and brushing your dog's teeth in order to reduce the chances of them having to have another dental procedure in the near future. If your dog has had extractions then they may need a follow up appointment with the vet or nurse.

How much will it cost?

Giving accurate estimates of costs can be tricky - in most cases your dog will need to be anaesthetised to allow us to probe their teeth to assess whether or not they need extractions. Costs will depend on the type and number of extractions needed, as well as the time spent under anaesthetic. We are always happy to provide an estimate of costs, please contact your vet or ask at reception.

- Costs for uncomplicated dental procedures include pre-medication, general anaesthetic, scaling and polishing and vary according to the size of the dog, with a higher price being for a larger dog due to the cost of the extra anaesthetic.
- As many dogs with dental disease fall into the 'senior' age range we would always advise a blood test before the anaesthetic to rule out any liver or kidney problems, especially as these can be seen more commonly when gum disease is present.
- Costs of root canal work will be discussed with you if we feel your dog is a suitable candidate for this procedure.

