

FACT SHEET

Dental Problems

Milk teeth

Puppies will begin to cut their teeth about 14 days after birth. They have 32 teeth in their first set, which does not include molars. Milk teeth are shed and replaced by the permanent adult teeth within 4-6 months.

Permanent teeth

Adult dogs should have a total of 42 teeth made up of 6 incisors on the upper and lower jaw, 2 canines on upper and lower jaw, 8 premolars on upper and lower jaw and 6 molars on the lower jaw whilst only 4 molars on the upper jaw. The fourth premolar in the upper jaw and first molar of the lower jaw are carnassial teeth, which are much bigger in comparison and are especially important for cutting tough material.

Congenital or development disorders

Unfortunately for certain breeds, often due to inbreeding, it is common for dogs to have problems with their mouths. Toy breeds particularly have too many teeth in relation to the size of their jaw, often overlapping in their position. Sometimes there is a congenital problem with the jaw, which is perhaps too long or short, leading to the teeth being unable to meet. Other structural problems include extra teeth developing and retained milk teeth causing permanent teeth to grow along side or in front.

In nearly all such situations, especially the retained milk teeth, your veterinary surgeon will advise to have the extra teeth removed, as they will cause food to become lodged which leads to dental decay in later life.

Periodontal disease

This disease starts from a bacterial film, called plaque, covering the teeth which if left without brushing or being dislodged by chewing bones, raw vegetables or eating wholemeal biscuits, will become mineralised by calcium salts within saliva and form tartar. Wild dogs and wolves will seldom suffer from this problem because they will tear up their food and chew large pieces of tough meat. This will have a cleansing effect that will help remove any bacterial deposits from around the teeth. Dogs that tend to suffer most from this condition are those fed a sticky diet where the food tends to stick around the teeth, or alternatively some dry foods which crumble leaving fragments in and around the teeth. High cereal diets will also contribute to tartar build-up on teeth: dog saliva does not contain the enzyme amylase, which in humans starts digesting starch material, thus any cereal matter not swallowed may remain on the teeth and gums and attract bacteria.

If the condition is left without treatment then the tartar will continue to build up and will soon inflame the gums. The gums will then become infected; the tooth will loosen and if left will eventually fall out. Though dogs can be very resilient, by this stage not only is the mouth extremely painful but it is likely to prevent a dog from eating.

Signs and symptoms

Although dogs feel toothache they are often able to hide it, without showing signs of discomfort for a long time. From a young age you should be handling your dog and checking the gums on a regular basis. Even in the early stages of decay your dog's breath will begin to smell (halitosis) and this is when something should be done. If nothing is done during the early stages then this will lead to more obvious signs such as bleeding gums and excessive salivation, with possible loss of appetite.

Treatment

Periodontal disease does not destroy teeth overnight, it can take months or even years to develop, however, the longer it is left the worse it will become. Once the gums are badly infected the dog will be swallowing the infection, which can enter the bloodstream reaching other parts of the body. Once tartar deposits have formed on the teeth it can be hard to dislodge. In such cases an ultrasonic scaler will be required to remove the tartar, under a general anaesthetic by your veterinary surgeon. Once the tartar and any loose teeth have been removed and the remaining healthy teeth are scaled and polished, there is important follow up care.

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Prevention

As with people, some dogs will unfortunately be prone to dental disease, however, there are certain things that can be done to help prevent decay occurring. Feeding a product such as Naturediet is often helpful in maintaining healthy teeth because the product does not contain added sugar and has a firm consistency with crushed bone providing mild abrasion. This means that although the product is a moist meal the consistency is such that it will not stick around the teeth causing bacteria to form and decay to develop.

Allow your dog to use his natural chewing instinct by encouraging him to chew safe toys such as a 'nylabone' or giving a hard raw vegetable such as a carrot. Rawhide chews, pigs ears and bones are acceptable but these should be given under supervision to adult dogs and never to young puppies to avoid a choking hazard. Occasionally you may see blood on a chew or vegetable when the dog has finished, this is nothing to worry about, the chew will be helping to remove some of the tartar, which may cause the gums to bleed.

Before decay has started to develop it is worth introducing your dog to having his teeth brushed with an ordinary toothbrush. There are many dog toothpastes on the market, which do not froth as much as human toothpaste and are designed to be tasty for the dog. Avoid toothpaste with any added sugar as this will only make matters worse. Being able to work inside a dog's mouth also reinforces your dominance over the dog.

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