

Keeping your cat's teeth – *what you need to know*



Healthy gums but a crown fracture exposing the pulp cavity of the inner left canine tooth necessitating treatment

Callum Blair helps us brush up on dental hygiene

We are well aware of the importance of keeping our own teeth and gums healthy yet the importance of caring for a cat's teeth and gums is not discussed as frequently – perhaps because many of us approach our cats' mouths at our peril!

Unfortunately, research shows that periodontal disease in cats is all too common, occurring in 70 per cent of cats by the time they are three years old.* What's particularly worrying is that, as well as causing painful damage inside a cat's mouth, if left untreated, the bacteria involved can go on to affect other parts of the body.

So periodontal disease isn't something we can ignore – but the good news is that there are some simple, practical steps we can take to help protect our cats' mouths. Even better, they don't all involve getting our fingers bitten! But before we explore what these are, it's important to understand more about our cats' mouths and about the causes of periodontal disease.

A peek inside your cat's mouth

Kittens are born with 26 milk teeth which are replaced by 30 in an adult cat. Their teeth are highly evolved to help them hunt, kill and eat prey. The tiny incisors at the front are designed to grip prey while the sharp canine teeth kill and shred it. Further back in their mouths, they have eight pre-molar and four molar teeth.

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Callum graduated from Glasgow Vet School in 1994 and spent six and a half years in general practice in the south and east of England. He joined Virbac's Technical Support Team at the end of 2000. His current role involves training and advising vets, nurses and pet owners on pet healthcare and all aspects of Virbac's product range.

and gums healthy

Periodontal disease explained

Periodontal disease is a collective term for several inflammatory conditions, all caused by a build up of plaque and tartar on the teeth and gums supported by the periodontium – the gums, bone and ligaments of the jaw. The two most common conditions are:

- **Gingivitis** – this is caused by plaque bacteria which colonise the space between the tooth and gum, causing gum inflammation. It is generally reversible with appropriate treatment
- **Periodontitis** – if left untreated, gingivitis can develop into this more serious condition in which irreversible damage to the periodontium can occur

Plaque and bacteria start to accumulate on the teeth of adult cats, sticking to the membrane coating which covers each tooth and creating what's called a 'biofilm'. Over time, if they are not removed, disease-causing bacteria also attach themselves to the biofilm and start to cause the inflammation that leads to gingivitis. Meanwhile, some of the plaque also 'calcifies', turning into a substance called calculus or tartar – usually a light brown colour. It adheres to the teeth – in severe cases, covering the whole tooth – allowing more bacteria to lodge on its porous surface, together with food debris. Bad breath can then be caused by volatile sulphurs released by the bacteria.

As the gums start to become inflamed, the gap between the tooth and the gum margin becomes deeper. This adds to the problems as yet more bacteria find their way in and the problem worsens.

At this stage, gingivitis is usually painful but is reversible with treatment to remove the plaque and calculus. However, if it's not treated, it can become established and, in some animals, it will transform itself into the more serious condition of periodontitis. Not all cats develop periodontitis but, for those that do, the consequences can only be resolved by veterinary treatment. Some cats will lose teeth, develop painful abscesses or more serious oral conditions.

It is not well understood why some cats go on to develop periodontitis and others don't but issues such as overall health, diet, lifestyle and genetics may play a part.

Spotting the signs

Once gingivitis has turned into periodontitis, cats may be in pain. Most cats will hide pain and only subtle changes will be noticed. In extreme cases,

periodontitis may cause them to show a reduced interest in food or they may approach their food bowl then show a reluctance to eat. Sometimes weight loss can be dramatic. Cats may chew with obvious discomfort, drop food or swallow with difficulty. Some refuse dry food, showing a preference for wet food because it is softer to eat. Finally, some cats will drool and their saliva may contain blood. Bad breath is also a warning sign.

Prevention is better than cure

The two most effective ways to protect your cat are to establish a regular preventative health regime and to ensure they eat an appropriate diet.

In terms of a preventative regime, it's best to start when your cat is a kitten, because if he gets used to having you feel his mouth as a youngster, he may be more tolerant once he's grown up. But whatever the age of your cat, it's never too late to start! It's also useful to be in the routine of taking a look inside his mouth regularly to check for problems. If you have any concerns, raise them with your veterinary surgeon.

Brushing your cat's teeth is the gold standard in terms of preventative health because it's by far the most effective way to remove plaque. It's important to introduce the concept of brushing to cats slowly and always to use toothbrushes and toothpastes specifically designed for them. Cat toothpastes, for instance, have been formulated to be palatable to them. They don't foam, don't need to be rinsed away and don't contain fluoride which is toxic to cats. ▶



Gingivitis

Photos: The Veterinary Dental Surgery



Severe periodontitis



To help you do your bit to ensure your cat's mouth stays in tip top condition, animal health company Virbac is offering dental care packs to 20 lucky readers. Each pack contains:

- A finger brush and toothpaste pack to help you introduce brushing to your cat
- A dual ended toothbrush, specially designed to make brushing easier
- A tube of Enzymatic toothpaste to remove plaque while brushing
- A bottle of Vet Aquadent. This drinking water additive will limit plaque formation and freshen breath

Simply send us your name and address, either by email to competitions@cats.org.uk or by post to *The Cat* magazine, National Cat Centre, Chelwood Gate, Sussex RH17 7TT. 20 winners will be notified and receive their dental care pack direct from Virbac. Please mark your emails and envelopes 'VIRBAC'. The closing date is 11 October 2013.

If you want to start brushing for the first time, it may be helpful to introduce the toothpaste first for a few days, putting some on the end of your finger and encouraging your cat to lick it off. You can also try brushing first with a finger brush. Lift up the lips carefully, to expose the gums then massage the teeth and gums gently. Once your cat tolerates this, you can progress to a special cat toothbrush. Ideally you should brush your cat's teeth daily or a minimum of every other day. When attempting to clean your cat's teeth always take into consideration your cat's temperament and do not allow yourself to get bitten. Seek medical attention should you receive a cat bite as antibiotics are always recommended.

You can supplement your toothbrushing with the use of an oral rinse. These contain chlorhexidine, which is a well-known anti-plaque agent and is effective against most of the bacteria found in your cat's mouth. Used once a day in addition to (or if all else fails instead of!) brushing, a rinse will help to reduce the level of bacteria and remove debris. This will reduce the incidence of gingivitis.

Finally, you can also use a product which you can add to your cat's drinking water. An example is Virbac's Vet Aquadent, which helps limit the build-up of plaque and freshens breath – but this is not a replacement for tooth brushing or a chlorhexidine solution.

In terms of diet, it is arguable that soft, wet foods provide no abrasive action against the teeth when chewing and so offer no prevention of plaque formation. Dry foods are more abrasive and encourage chewing and specific 'dental' diets have now also been developed to help to keep teeth clean in animals predisposed to dental disease. The kibble they contain is designed to push against the tooth surface to help keep them clean though, at present, their long-term efficiency in reducing periodontal disease is unproven.

While gum disease can be a problem for many cats, getting to grips with its causes and understanding what you can do to reduce the risk could save your pet great discomfort and pain – not to mention saving you costly veterinary treatment.

Putting a preventative regime in place really isn't difficult – so go on – give your cat something to smile about! ●

* Data from American Veterinary Dental Association