People are supposed to visit their dentist regularly to help keep their teeth and gums clean and healthy. But did you know that your pet needs regular dental care, too? Studies have shown that 80% of dogs and 70% of cats already have periodontal (gum) disease by the time they are 3 years old. Periodontal disease in dogs and cats can be painful, leads to tooth loss, and can contribute to other health problems, so it’s important to take steps to prevent it as much as possible.

**What Is Periodontal Disease?**
Periodontal disease starts when plaque (a bacterial film) coats the tooth. Plaque hardens (calcifies) into tartar, a thick yellow or brown layer on the teeth. Tartar can irritate the gums, creating an environment where bacteria thrive. As the disease progresses, the gums become tender, red, and swollen. Eventually, the inflamed gums pull away from the teeth, creating pockets that trap more bacteria and food particles. The gums bleed, the roots of the teeth may become exposed, teeth may become loose, and your pet may feel pain. If the bacteria enter the bloodstream, they can create problems for organs such as the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys.

Bad breath in pets may be a sign of periodontal disease. However, your pet may not let you know if he or she is in any pain. Animals try to hide pain, and unless they feel very ill, they usually continue to eat.

**What We Can Do for Your Pet’s Teeth**
Fortunately, there are several ways you can care for your pet’s teeth. One is simply to bring your pet in for his or her regular checkups. As part of the examination, we take a quick look at your pet’s teeth to look for plaque and tartar. Based on what we see, we may recommend a dental prophylaxis (tooth cleaning) for your pet. Dental cleanings are performed with the pet under anesthesia, so we will also want to do some basic blood tests to see whether anesthesia is right for your pet. If your pet has severe dental disease, the best treatment may include tooth extraction. We prescribe pain medication for your pet after dental procedures to make sure he or she is comfortable.
Don't wait for a regular checkup if you suspect a problem! The earlier we catch periodontal disease, the easier it is to treat.

**What You Can Do for Your Pet’s Teeth**

Believe it or not, the best way you can help protect your pet’s teeth is the same way you protect your own: brushing. Pets are never too young to start having their teeth brushed at home; in fact, the younger they are, the better. Brushing works best when started on a clean mouth, so talk to us before you begin.

Toothbrushing should be a bonding experience that is constantly reinforced with praise and rewards. Be patient—teaching your pet to accept toothbrushing may take weeks. Start slowly and gently by rubbing your pet’s teeth and gums with your finger. (You only need to do the outside of your pet’s teeth—the side facing the cheek.) Only do as much at a time as your pet allows. At first, you might want to dip your finger in something tasty to your pet, like beef broth or juice from a can of tuna. Then, try rubbing with your finger wrapped in soft gauze. Gradually switch to using a specially designed pet toothbrush or baby toothbrush with pet toothpaste. Do not use toothpaste for people, which can upset your pet’s stomach. If your pet is most at ease on your lap, keep his or her toothbrush next to the chair where you sit together. Focus on your pet’s gum line, and work up to 30 seconds of brushing for each side of the mouth at least a few times a week. Make toothbrushing enjoyable for your pet by rewarding him or her immediately after each session.

Some pets just don’t take to toothbrushing. If you can’t brush your pet’s teeth, ask us about plaque-preventive products.

**Other Ways to Reduce Plaque**

There’s no substitute for regular dental care, but feeding dry food can help keep your pet’s teeth and gums in good condition. In addition, special plaque-reducing foods, treats, and toys can help. The Seal of Acceptance from the Veterinary Oral Health Council appears on products that meet defined standards for plaque and tartar control in dogs and cats. Ask us which products we recommend!

Caring for your pet’s teeth can have several benefits. For example, a few minutes of brushing each week can help give your pet a longer, healthier life.