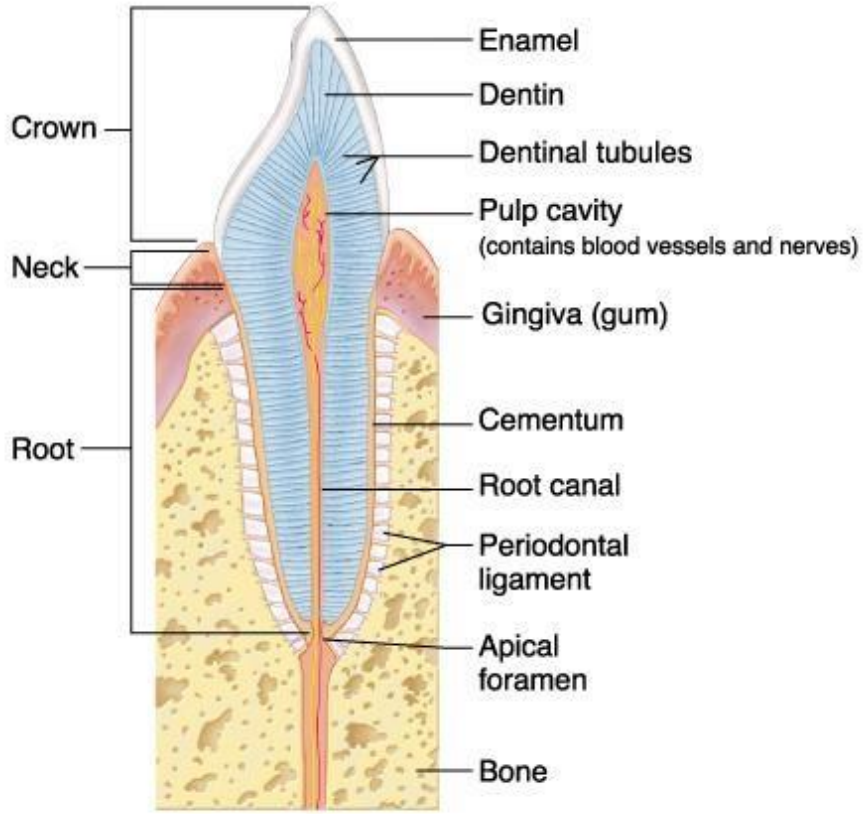
Why should I get my dog's/cat's teeth cleaned?

Dental care in cats and dogs is an important emerging challenge in modern veterinary medicine. There are 3 main problems to dental care for animals.

1) Teeth are icebergs.

By this we mean that most of the tooth structure is hidden from view. While the crown is easily visible, the neck can be examined only under an anaesthetic and the root can only be seen with an x-ray.



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Dental disease of the crown is rare, even when calculus or tartar is present on the crown it is an impervious layer of enamel and resistant to infection or complications, the most common "disease" of the crown is tooth fractures.

The neck of the tooth is the primary area of dental disease. This is the area of the tooth that comes into contact with the gum line (the gingiva), tartar and calculus here cause gingivitis, which can easily develop to gum recession, bone recession, loose teeth and infection.

The root of the tooth is completely hidden by bone in a healthy tooth, however infection in the neck can track into the root causing infection along the whole tooth or allow the root to be exposed through the gum. There is also a condition called a tooth root abscess where an infection forms only in the root. In these cases the crown and even the neck can look normal, but the tooth is sore, infected and likely to shed bacteria into the blood stream. The only way to identify these teeth is with a dental x-ray.

2) Cats and dogs hide dental disease.

We tend to assume that if our patients have dental disease they would show symptoms at home, but it never ceases to amaze me how many cats will continue to hunt, and eat completely normally, and how many dogs will chew on bones, despite dental disease and pain being present. This is due to the fact that in nature animals have little choice, dental disease develops in wildlife, and if they stop eating they will starve or succumb to predation, so they will just push through. This habit is still present in our companions today.

3) Home care is challenging and time consuming.

The single best home care to maintain healthy teeth is tooth brushing. To brush the teeth every day, just the same as humans. There are multiple other options for cats and dogs including dental chews, dental mouth washes and water additives, all of which can help maintain a healthy mouth, but nothing beats brushing teeth. Unfortunately, many animals resent tooth brushing, and it is a time-consuming daily treatment. The best data to date does show daily brushing as the most effective but three times a week is the minimum needed to get a beneficial effect.

What's the problem with dental disease if they are still eating?

Dental disease causes pain and suffering with infected, sore teeth, which is a significant quality of life concern, and as previously mentioned most cats and dogs will mask this pain and continue eating through it, however dental disease is also associated with other health concerns.

The bacteria in the mouth can enter the blood stream and be transported to other areas of the body resulting in further infection and organ damage. The kidneys and the heart are at particular risk. Severe infections in the mouth can also lead to infection in the bones of the jaw, or abscesses in the mouth and around the eye. These can be very difficult to resolve requiring months of antibiotics.

How do we at VetHQ help to prevent disease?

At home dental care is important, but regular dental checks are also important, just as with our own teeth even with twice daily brushing we see our dentists every 6-12 months and, in many cases, still need a scale to remove what has built up. Cats and dogs are no different. When we examine teeth, we are looking for the obvious signs of tartar and calculus build up, but we are also looking for any problems in the all-important "neck" region of the tooth, including gingivitis, gum recession, gum swelling or discharge.

Scaling and polishing teeth that are still healthy allows us to maintain their health. Unfortunately, a truly thorough clean of the whole crown and neck areas of the teeth can only occur under an anesthetic, as the most important area to clean is the area under the gumline.

Dental disease is approximately 30% bacteria and 70% inflammation, meaning the bodies reaction makes up most of the cause for dental disease. This is why some individuals can go their years without treatment and have very minimal disease, whereas others would quickly develop diseased and sore teeth. On average most patients need a full scale and polish around every 6 months, but some will have healthier teeth for much longer keeping 12 to 18 months between each treatment, and some are unlucky and will need more frequent cleans every 3 months.

Our 6 monthly dental program is designed to monitor dental hygiene, and act proactively to stop dental disease. While treating dental disease is good, stopping its development in the first place is great and by acting proactively not just do we help to prevent the development of severe disease, but we are also able to pass on the cost reduction of the shorter procedure with a wellness discount.

If you have any questions on dental care, health or checks please feel free to talk to one of our staff who will be happy to help,

Good Health,
Dr Tony