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Ten Steps to Your Dog's Dental Health



Did you know that regularly brushing your dog's teeth and providing her with a healthy diet and plenty of chew toys can go a long way toward keeping her mouth healthy? Many pooches show signs of gum disease by the time they're four years old because they aren't provided with proper mouth care—and bad breath is often the first sign of a problem. Give your dog regular home checks and follow the tips below, and you'll have a very contented pooch with a dazzling smile.

1. The Breath Test

Sniff your dog's breath. Not a field of lilies? That's okay—normal doggie-breath isn't particularly fresh-smelling. However, if his breath is especially offensive and is accompanied by a loss of appetite, vomiting or excessive drinking or urinating, it's a good idea to take your pooch to the vet.

2. Lip Service

Once a week, with your dog facing you, lift his lips and examine his gums and teeth. The gums should be pink, not white or red, and should show no signs of swelling. His teeth should be clean, without any brownish tartar.

3. Signs of Oral Disease

The following are signs that your dog may have a problem in his mouth or gastrointestinal system and should be checked by a veterinarian:

- Bad breath
- Excessive drooling

- Inflamed gums
- Tumors in the gums
- Cysts under the tongue
- Loose teeth

4. The Lowdown on Tooth Decay

Bacteria and plaque-forming foods can cause build-up on a dog's teeth. This can harden into tartar, possibly causing gingivitis, receding gums and tooth loss. One solution? Regular teeth cleanings, of course.

5. Canine Tooth-Brushing Kit

Get yourself a toothbrush made especially for canines or a clean piece of soft gauze to wrap around your finger. Ask your vet for a toothpaste made especially for canines or make a paste out of baking soda and water. Never use fluoride with dogs under six months of age—it can interfere with their enamel formation. And please do not use human toothpaste, which can irritate a dog's stomach. Special mouthwash for dogs is also available—ask your vet.

6. Brightening the Pearly Whites

Taking these steps will make brushing a lot easier for the both of you:

- First get your dog used to the idea of having her teeth brushed. Massage her lips with your finger in a circular motion for 30 to 60 seconds once or twice a day for a few weeks. Then move on to her teeth and gums.
- When your pooch seems comfortable being touched this way, put a little bit of dog-formulated toothpaste or a paste of baking soda and water on her lips to get her used to the taste.
- Next, introduce a toothbrush designed especially for dogs—it should be smaller than a human toothbrush and have softer bristles. Toothbrushes that you can wear over your finger (or a clean piece of gauze) are also available and allow you to give a nice massage to your dog's gums.
- Finally, apply the toothpaste to her teeth for a gentle brushing, as in step 7.
- A veterinary exam beforehand may be helpful to find out if your dog's gums are inflamed. If your dog has mild gingivitis, brushing too hard can hurt her gums.

7. Brushing Technique

Yes, there is actually a technique! Place the brush or your gauze-wrapped finger at a 45-degree angle to the teeth and clean in small, circular motions. Work on one area of your dog's mouth at a time, lifting her lip as necessary. The side of the tooth that touches the cheek usually has the most tartar, and giving a final downward stroke can help to remove it. If your dog resists having the inner surfaces of her teeth cleaned, don't fight it—only a small amount of tartar accumulates there. Once you get the technique down, go for a brushing two or three times a week.

8. Know Your Mouth Disorders

Getting familiar with the possible mouth problems your dog may encounter will help you determine when it's time to see a vet about treatment:

- **Periodontal disease** is a painful infection between the tooth and the gum that can result in tooth loss and spread infection to the rest of the body. Signs are loose teeth, bad breath, tooth pain, sneezing and nasal discharge.
- **Gingivitis** is an inflammation of the gums caused mainly by accumulation of plaque, tartar and disease-producing bacteria above and below the gum line. Signs include bleeding, red, swollen gums and bad breath. It is reversible with regular teeth cleanings.
- **Halitosis**—or bad breath—can be the first sign of a mouth problem and is caused by bacteria growing from food particles caught between the teeth or by gum infection. Regular tooth-brushings are a great solution.
- **Swollen gums** develop when tartar builds up and food gets stuck between the teeth. Regularly brushing your dog's teeth at home and getting annual cleanings at the vet can prevent tartar and gingivitis.
- **Proliferating gum disease** occurs when the gum grows over the teeth and must be treated to avoid gum infection. An inherited condition common to boxers and bull terriers, it can be treated with antibiotics.
- **Mouth tumors** appear as lumps in the gums. Some are malignant and must be surgically removed.
- **Salivary cysts** look like large, fluid-filled blisters under the tongue, but can also develop near the corners of the jaw. They require drainage, and the damaged saliva gland must be removed.
- **Canine distemper teeth** can occur if a dog had distemper as a puppy. Adult teeth can appear looking eroded and can often decay. As damage is permanent, decayed teeth should be removed by a vet.

9. Chew on This

chew toys can satisfy your dog's natural desire to chomp, while making his teeth strong. Gnawing on a chew toy can also help massage his gums and help keep his teeth clean by scraping away soft tartar. Ask your vet to recommend toxin-free rawhide, nylon and rubber chew toys.

P.S.: Gnawing also reduces your dog's overall stress level, prevents boredom and gives him an appropriate outlet for his natural need to chew.

10. Diet for Healthy Teeth

Ask your vet about a specially formulated dry food that can slow down the formation of plaque and tartar. Also, avoid feeding your dog table scraps, instead giving him treats that are specially formulated to keep canine teeth healthy.

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