

Dear Dr. Wise,

Question: My veterinarian said I should have my dog's teeth cleaned. What do you think?

Answer: Most of us understand the importance of good oral health for ourselves and visit our dentist at least twice a year. But only a small percentage of people would do the same thing for their pets. Studies in human dentistry and medicine have shown that there appears to be an association between heart disease and dental disease. Is this true for our pets as well?

In a recent nationwide veterinary study, more than 45,000 cases of dogs with serious dental disease were reviewed. These dogs were compared with another 45,000 dogs of similar gender, age, and breed that did not have any dental disease. Their report shows that there appears to be a strong association between the health of your pet's mouth and the incidence of other health issues, such as heart murmurs or even infection of the lining of the heart.

Dental care of dogs and cats is one of the most commonly overlooked areas of pet health care. A recent American Animal Hospital Association report on compliance within veterinary practices showed that less than 35% of pets who need a dental cleaning ever receive one. The reasons for this level of non-compliance are many, but often, pet owners will report that they just didn't know their pets needed dental work or even that their pets suffered from periodontal disease.

Just as with people, periodontal disease in our pets starts the same way. It begins when food particles, saliva, and bacteria attached to the teeth produce a filmy matrix called "plaque". If this matrix is not disrupted, "calculus" forms. More commonly known as tartar, the calculus makes the surface of the tooth rough and provides a better hold for more bacteria and helps to protect the bacteria from being dislodged. These bacteria will then infect the gums, causing a condition known as gingivitis. If not treated appropriately, gingivitis can progress into periodontal disease, destroying the bone that supports the tooth. It's hard to believe, but there may even be an association between dirty teeth and other serious diseases. The same bacteria that cause dental disease have been found in the hearts of dogs with heart disease.

To help prevent dental problems from becoming a serious health issue, veterinarians recommend that oral health care start early. Your new puppy or kitten should become comfortable with you examining its mouth. Early training will help the pet to learn to tolerate brushing and other preventive measures and will help you recognize abnormalities. Simple awareness of the health of your pet's mouth can help you to provide better health care for your pet. As your pet ages, a weekly check of the mouth may also help to find issues before they become dangerous. You should take time to look for plaque and tartar, especially on the large canine teeth in the front of the mouth and the big shearing teeth in the back of the mouth. Other potential areas of concern include fractured teeth, gum tissue that is overgrown or does not appear to be a healthy pink color, bleeding from the gums or any ulceration in the mouth. In addition to using your eyes, your nose can be an important tool as well. Pets are not supposed to have bad breath! If you can detect any foul odor, or if you see any problems in your pet's mouth, your pet should be seen by your family veterinarian.

You are an important part of the fight against dental disease. Working with your veterinarian, you can learn to identify potential problems earlier and help your pet lead a, healthier life.

If you have a question, write Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Avenue, Suite 405, Indianapolis, IN, 46225, or [www.invma.org](http://www.invma.org)