



# Why dogs (& cats) look dumb in dentures

By Stacey Warren

Those of you who suffer from weak stomachs or are dentophobic (have a fear of dentists) should not read on. Those of you who are serious about your pet's overall health should read on and, if you haven't already, also read this edition's vet columns.

## Dental OCD

I once had a flatmate who had a peculiar quirk and for a while, our other flatmate and I thought she had some form of OCD—obsessive, compulsive disorder. She was always scrubbing, flossing and rinsing her teeth. Sure, she had a lovely set of gnashers and shiny gums but it just seemed weird to us that after every meal a ten minute scrub, floss, gargle and rinse routine would take place, all before doing the dishes. It turned out, the reason why she was so focussed on the health of her pearly whites came down to her upbringing—specifically her mother.

I remember us girls squealing in revulsion when she told us that as a little nipper she was made to brush her mother's teeth—false teeth. Apparently her mother had every tooth extracted when she was barely into her mid-20s. And we're not talking back into the dark ages either as this was in the 70s. Once she regaled us with this tale of tooth terror, we totally related to her oral hygiene obsession. Keeping her teeth until she died was her mission.

## Knock me out—please

On my travels, I'm always keen to check out pet stores or shops that cater to pet needs and pet lovers. I found myself in a very upmarket dog themed shop on a recent trip to America. The counter had a collection of business cards from local pet related services and one in particular grabbed my attention. It was for a dog dental hygienist who cleaned teeth 'naturally' without the need for sedation or anesthesia. This seemed interesting as not many of us pet loving folk really like the idea of our furred ones being knocked out or put under for something that we presume should be a pretty routine procedure.

Being the curious kind, I asked the shop owner what she knew about this practice. Apparently the hygienist utilised an ancient American Indian method of calming the pet patient and through this technique was able to scale and clean any grubby build-up. When I have a routine dental clean my dentist administers a little 'happy gas' to take the edge off any discomfort. So common sense tells me that if it's going to be uncomfortable for me then it's going to be a really scary process for any pet.

On the surface, the sedation-free idea of cleaning pets' teeth sounded like an attractive alternative. That is until I dug deeper and explored the realities of proper 'scale and clean' by a vet. *The squeamish can look away at this point.* Proper dental scaling requires sedation because the vet needs to get to the areas under the gums and between the teeth. This is a painful but necessary part of the procedure and I doubt that even the most calm and serene dog or cat is going to just lay there and let this be done to them. The need for sedation is not some grubby vet conspiracy to extract more money out of you—it's vital during this painful and messy procedure! (Read Dr Adam's column for the really juicy bits.)

## Why are little dogs more susceptible?

It's evolution baby! We've shrunk those little suckers down and tried to cram a whole bunch of teeth into little jaws. Tooth crowding is common in smaller breeds as evolutionary reduction in the size of teeth takes place at a slower rate than the shortening of the facial bones.

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Small, hairy dogs are also high risk for getting dental problems as through grooming, hair can get trapped between teeth. Certain breeds with shorter snouts or brachycephalic breeds—like pugs, Pekingese, bull dogs and Persian cats often have bite problems too. (Brachycephalic comes from the Greek language, brachy, meaning short and cephalic meaning head—get it—short head).

### Types of teeth and their functions

There are four types of teeth in small animals: incisor, canine, premolar, and molar. Nature designed each to serve a special function. Incisor teeth are used for shearing and grooming. The canines are designed to grasp and tear with great pressure. Premolar teeth have sharp edges used for shearing. Molars have a flat surface used for grinding.

In the dog, there are four premolar teeth on either side of the upper and lower jaws. Cats have three premolars on each side of the upper jaw and two on the lower. Dogs have four molars in the upper jaw and six in the lower. Cats have one upper and lower molar on each side.

### Start oral hygiene early

Kittens and puppies get their baby (or deciduous teeth) at around three to four weeks. Adult teeth begin to come through around three to four months of age. Dogs will end up with 42 teeth whereas cats have 30 permanent pearlys. It makes sense to practice good oral hygiene early to get your pooch or puss used to having their mouths touched and receive regular brushing. (Editors note: Urban Animal issue 2 had a very informative cat vet column from Dr Catt regarding cat oral care. You can still find this online.)

### Use your senses, look, listen & smell

Don't just wait until your pet's next vet checkup to have a peek at the pearlys. You should make a point of checking out your pet if you have any doubts or encounter any of the following. Clinical signs of dental problems may include:

- redness around the gums
- brown tartar and calculus build-up on teeth
- worn or broken teeth
- bad breath (doggy breath is not cute!)
- wobbly or loose teeth
- your pet does not tolerate having mouth or gums touched
- seems to eat on one side of their mouth
- any kind of abscess or other scary growth

### Prevention; prevention; prevention and did we mention prevention?—it's the best cure

No one likes to sound like a broken record but it's all about prevention, people! The kind of diet you feed your loved fur ones plays a vital role in their continued health. And always get your vet to have a good poke around the gums and teeth on every visit. They can often see what you and I can't.



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# Pets need dental care, too



For most of us, caring for our teeth and gums has been part of our daily routine for as long as we can remember. Just like it is for you, oral health care is important for pets – regular, professional care from veterinarians and home care from pet owners to keep plaque removed.

## Why worry about a pet's oral health?

Dental disease begins with plaque build up on tooth surfaces, and as a result, bacteria can begin to irritate the gum causing an inflammatory condition called gingivitis. If inflammation of the gum is left untreated, the bone around the roots of teeth can begin to deteriorate, and as the bone tissue is destroyed, teeth may become loose or even fall out. In the worst cases, the infection has the potential to spread to the pet's heart, liver or kidneys.

## How to treat dental disease

Daily brushing (if possible!) is best but feeding a special pet food such as Hill's\* Prescription Diet\* t/d\* or Hill's Science Diet\* Oral Care\* can help prevent the onset of dental disease – the most commonly diagnosed health problem in pets in Australia. These products are the only pet foods in

the country that carry the VOHC (Veterinary Oral Health Council) seal of approval for both plaque and tartar control. In addition to providing superior nutrition for your pets with the best formulations and ingredients available, the benefits to feeding this range to your pet include:

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## What to look out for

All pets are at risk of developing dental problems, so we recommend you "Flip the Lip" regularly to see if your pet has any of the following signs of dental disease:

- **Bad Breath**
- **Tooth Loss**
- **Abnormal Drooling**
- **Bleeding Gums**
- **Yellow-Brown Crust On Teeth**

If you have any doubts about your pet's good health, or have seen any recent changes in behaviour, please refer to your veterinarian.

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