



# *Dental Health* *Frequently Asked Questions*

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## **How common is dental disease?**

Dental disease is the most common serious ailment in cats and dogs! 85% of adult dogs and cats have periodontal disease. The incidence and severity of dental disease increases as pets age. In fact, the vast majority of cats and dogs 3 years of age or older have dental disease and are in need of professional dental care.

## **Is dental disease painful?**

Dental disease is very painful. Study after study has shown that cats and dogs experience pain like we do, but actively hide their pain from observers. This instinct to hide their pain protected them from predators in their original wild state, but now it makes it harder for us to help our pets because we sometimes have to look for very subtle signs of pain. Surely, if we could know what pain they experience, we would be much more likely to aggressively treat it. Protecting our pets from the agony of decaying and infected teeth and gums is one of the most important things we can do to keep our pets healthy, comfortable and happy.

## **Can dental health affect my pet's behavior?**

Yes!! Many owners report dramatic improvements in their pet's behavior, playfulness and reduced crankiness after dental treatment. These behavior improvements are most likely the result of the relief from chronic severe pain.

## **This is all new to me! Why haven't I heard about pet dental care before?**

Medicine evolves!! These medical advances are why pets (and people!) now live longer lives than ever before. Just a few years ago, most veterinarians often waited until dental disease was very advanced (and irreversible) before strongly recommending professional dental care. Today we know that we must **prevent** problems from becoming severe instead of allowing them to worsen for years before helping. With our new understanding of the importance of dental health, modern veterinarians are rapidly acquiring the knowledge and equipment needed to properly prevent and treat dental disease.

Recent advances in veterinary dentistry allow us to prevent, treat and cure dental disease much more effectively than we could only a few years ago. Just a few years ago, quality veterinary dentistry was practiced by just a handful of specialists. General practice veterinarians were limited by our training and tools to very basic and incomplete dentistry so most pets simply did without. Things are changing rapidly today. In late 2005 the first national veterinary dental guidelines (the AAHA Dental Care Guidelines) were published by leaders in the field after reviewing decades of research. For the first time, the best veterinary dentists in the world came together and provided us guidance about exactly what we primary care veterinarians need to do to care for our patients' oral health – and when and how we need to do it.

By investing in top quality tools (very similar to those in your own dentist's office) and committing ourselves to practicing the best possible primary care dentistry, we have become able to better diagnose and treat many common dental problems. High speed drills, dental x-ray, excellent new dental antibiotics and other medications and tools have added great dental power to our practice. Veterinarians are rapidly learning how to use these new technologies to benefit our patients. By taking our dentistry practice to "the next level", we can now add quality and quantity to our patient's lives through better dentistry.

## **Now that veterinarians know how to provide good dental care, why aren't more pets getting it?**

We know it's **not** because owners don't care. Many studies have shown that Americans generally consider our pets members of our families and we want to do what's best for them. And, I know many very loving owners whose pets haven't gotten the dental care they need over the years. I know that many pet owners would be providing better dental care if they understood how effective it can be in keeping their pets healthy, extending their lives and making them so much more comfortable. So, it's not a lack of caring. Why then? We think the reason most pets aren't getting the dental care they need boils down to us vets not doing a good enough job providing the information to owners and committing to providing high quality dental care to patients.





# *Dental Health F.A.Q.s cont'd*

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## ***At what age should dental care start?***

Dental care should begin as soon as you bring your new pet home with daily tooth brushing with pet toothpaste. The earlier you begin, the more quickly your pet will come to accept or even look forward to his dental care.

## ***What do I need to do at home?***

Good home care is essential to maintaining or improving dental health. Daily (or at least 3 times per week) tooth brushing is the gold standard of preventive home dental care. OraVet Plaque Prevention Gel, CET Dental Rewards, CET Rawhide Chews and CET Oral Rinse are all good products that are recognized as effective and safe by the VOHC (Veterinary Oral Health Council) that can supplement regular brushing or can help if brushing is not a good option for you.

Our nurses will gladly show you how to take care of your pet's teeth at home to keep them their best between professional cleanings. We will work with you to find an effective, simple at home dental care routine that works for you and your pet. Because we realize that home dental care is essential to maintaining dental health, we provide a no-charge follow up nurse home care consultation visit 14 days after the dental visit so that the nurse can review home care with you at that time and we will provide whatever additional support you need. Educating you about proper home care is our duty. Ask any time for more information or coaching.

## ***Is there anything we should do for our puppy's (or kitten's) teeth?***

The best thing you can do for your pet's dental health is to begin daily tooth brushing when you first bring your pet home. The earlier you accustom your pet to the tooth brush, the easier it will be!

When pets are surgically altered at 4-6 months of age, we recommend strengthening their pretty new adult teeth with a fluoride treatment and considering OraVet sealant and Plaque Prevention Gel for continuing protection.

## ***At what age does my pet need start annual Dental Assessment, Hygiene & Treatment visits?***

Annual dental care visits are generally needed starting at the **age of two for large dogs** and starting at the **age of one for small dogs and cats** (who are more prone to early onset severe dental disease.) Caring for the teeth early and properly will prevent more severe dental disease from developing.

## ***Does my pet need a Dental Assessment, Hygiene & Treatment visit?***

**Probably!** Just like people, pets need regular dental exams and cleaning to prevent disease from developing or progressing. **If we don't care for our pets' teeth, dental disease will develop sooner rather than later.** One of the new ideas the veterinary dentists have taught us is that it is best to prevent dental disease from developing in the first place through regular professional and home dental care. The AAHA Dental Care guidelines recommend **annual Dental A, H & T visits**. Routine professional dental care will **prevent** periodontal disease from developing in the first place and will bring established periodontal disease under control.

If the veterinarian has already recommended dental care or if your pet is 3 years of age or older, it is important to schedule the Dental A, H & T sooner instead of later. Established periodontal disease is a serious illness that must be treated promptly. Pets with advanced disease may require more frequent care to bring the disease under control.

If you aren't sure whether your pet needs a Dental A, H & T or if you want to talk to the veterinarian before scheduling, we offer a no-charge dental exam at any time – just call for an appointment. An oral exam is also part of every complete physical exam, so if your pet is due for an exam or vaccinations, we will check your pet's oral health at that time.

## ***Is it ever too late for dental care?***

If it's not too late for your pet, it's not too late to take care of her mouth! With proper care, dental disease is both preventable and treatable. Caught early, dental disease can often be cured. Even when caught later, effective treatment is still available to prevent the progression of the disease and prevent complications such as organ damage and further tooth loss. Sometimes owners think their pet is "too old" or "too sick" for anesthesia and dentistry, but usually the benefits of relieving the infection and pain of oral disease far outweigh the risks of the procedure. Owners are often pleasantly surprised by how young and sprightly their older pet can behave after treatment for periodontal disease.



# *Dental A, H & T* *Frequently Asked Questions*

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## ***What on earth is a Dental A, H & T?***

We call our comprehensive dental visit a **Dental Assessment, Hygiene & Treatment** visit (Dental A, H & T in AMC shorthand). During the Dental Assessment, Hygiene & Treatment visit, the patient is first examined and pre-anesthetic blood and/or urine test results are reviewed. Next, an IV Catheter is placed and warmed IV fluids are administered continuously. Your pet is placed on a circulating warm-water blanket and covered with insulating polar fleece blankets to keep him cozy and comfortable. Next, your pet is anesthetized with a combination of safe drugs. An endotracheal breathing tube is placed to protect your pet's airway and to administer the gas anesthesia. Your pet's response to the anesthesia and condition are monitored by a veterinary nurse throughout the procedure and adjustments are made as needed.

A complete dental **assessment** of the patient's dental health includes a thorough tooth-by-tooth periodontal exam and dental charting and whole mouth survey x-rays. Next, the veterinarian determines a **treatment plan** as to which, if any, teeth or gums need any surgery, extractions or other treatment. The owner is, if possible, contacted by phone at this point to discuss the treatment plan.

Meanwhile, comprehensive dental **hygiene** care is provided including irrigation with an antibacterial rinse, pizeoelectric scaling (removing tartar) from all teeth both above and below the gum line, polishing all teeth, applying fluoride and lastly applying dental sealant.

The veterinarian provides any **treatment** needed to eliminate sources of infection and to eliminate or reduce gum pockets which are reservoirs of bacteria and chronic infection. Treatments may include extracting severely decayed teeth, surgically trimming gums or deep cleaning and long-acting polymer antibiotic treatment of deep gum pockets and exposed roots. Pain medications are administered if major surgery or extractions are performed.

Your pet is carefully monitored while recovering from anesthesia. You are contacted with an update on your pet's condition and discharge is scheduled for later that afternoon. You are provided complete follow up care instructions and any take-home medications by the nurse and have an opportunity to talk to the veterinarian if you have any remaining questions. A recheck visit is scheduled for 14 days later to review home care and to check any surgery sites.

## ***Is the Dental Assessment, Hygiene & Treatment safe?***

Yes!! The risks of dental disease far outweigh the risks of treatment. As with every procedure we do, we take every reasonable precaution to keep your pet safe and comfortable before, during and after the procedure. We adhere to high safety and patient care standards. Modern anesthesia monitoring, patient warming, sterile techniques and anesthetic and pain management plans customized to the need of each patient are just a few of the things we do to safeguard our patients' wellbeing.

Before placing your pet under anesthesia, it is important to identify any health issues that may make anesthesia higher risk. The comprehensive physical exam the veterinarian performs before surgery can identify many concerns and blood testing and/or urinalysis will **identify many infections, organ dysfunction and other conditions that are not apparent through physical exam**. If the doctor finds any abnormal results, he will talk with you about how we can address any health concerns before proceeding with surgery. Sometimes we may need to delay the anesthesia until we have addressed any problems, but most often we can proceed with the dentistry with consideration of any special precautions that are indicated and follow up with any additional needed treatment after surgery.

## ***How does an IV Catheter and IV fluids before & during dentistry make it safer?***

The IV Catheter provides us with immediate access to a vein for administering drugs and/or fluids. This is a vital safety precaution for every anesthetized patient. Additional fluids are important because they help **protect your pet's kidneys and other organs by helping to maintain blood pressure** during surgery.

## ***How does fluoride help?***

A fluoride treatment helps **harden the tooth enamel to protect against decay** and also helps desensitize the teeth to prevent pain. Fluoride can only be applied under anesthesia since it is toxic to dogs and cats and must be wiped away before the pet can swallow it.





# *Dental A, H & T F.A.Q.s cont'd*

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## **What does OraVet Dental Sealant do?**

OraVet sealant helps seal out plaque and bacteria and prevent decay. After we apply the sealant while your pet is under anesthesia, you follow up with quick and easy once-a-week applications of OraVet Plaque Prevention gel at home to refresh the seal. OraVet can be used alone or along with brushing for optimum protection.

## **Why bother with intra-oral dental x-ray?**

Dental x-ray is an extremely valuable tool for diagnosing painful dental problems that hide under the gums, in the bones of the mouth and between the teeth. Veterinary dentists have been using dental x-ray for years to evaluate problems hidden under the surface. Now that the value of dental x-ray is understood, dental x-ray has become part of the recommended standards of care for all pets, just as dental x-rays are an essential part of dental care for people. It's like driving at night with the lights off – doing it is understandable if your lights are burned out and you have to get your sick kid to the hospital, but we'd all probably agree that it's crazy to pull onto the freeway with your headlights simply turned off! Veterinary standards of care now recommend annual dental x-rays as part of the routine dental assessment. In learning more about the emerging field of veterinary dentistry, we have become convinced that dental x-ray is an essential tool in caring for our patients. Part of our dental assessment process is whole mouth survey dental x-ray films. Additional films are taken when needed during and after extractions or other procedures.

## **Will my pet be in pain afterwards?**

No! Your pet will be relieved from the pain of dental disease!! The veterinarian will prescribe appropriate pain medications to help your pet through any temporary pain due to any needed extractions or surgery.

## **Why must you anesthetize my pet? Can't you do it "awake"?**

Meaningful dental care is not possible on an "awake" animal. We can not even perform a comprehensive dental exam without anesthesia since cats and dogs will not tolerate opening wide and holding still while we prod and poke and neither will they hold still for x-rays!! Only after the patient is under anesthesia can a comprehensive oral exam begin. These routine exams very often uncover startlingly serious dental problems that are not apparent without anesthesia. Properly cleaning the teeth involves scaling below the gum line and scraping away the tartar from any roots that are exposed or where the gum has separated from the tooth root ("pockets"). This just **can't** be done on an "awake" animal.

## **Ouch! That's expensive!**

**Preventing dental disease is cheap.** Treating advanced dental disease can be expensive. One of the most sensible comments I've heard about dentistry was, "**Pay a little now or a lot later.**" Your pet's toothbrush is free from AMC and a tube of \$10 toothpaste will last many months – these few dollars a year and few minutes a day may be the best investment you can make in your pet's health! It is always easier, safer and cheaper to prevent disease or to treat it when caught at an early stage than to treat more advanced disease. So, the best thing for your pet's health and your wallet is to address dental health issues early, thoroughly and regularly!!

Unfortunately, when it comes to medicine, quality costs. The Dental Assessment, Hygiene & Treatment visit is a complicated, staff intensive, anesthetized medical (and often surgical) procedure that requires well-trained staff and a well-equipped hospital to do correctly. We invest in top quality staff and modern equipment. We take the time needed to provide meticulous care to our patients and thoughtful service to our clients. When faced with a choice of material, technique or equipment, we make the choices that make our procedures safer, more effective, less painful and in other ways superior to the alternatives. We have made an ethical commitment to provide safe and humane care to all our patients. Because of this commitment, we routinely include all the essential elements of a safe, effective and humane procedure on all estimates (pain medications, IV catheter, IV fluids, patient warming, anesthesia monitoring, comprehensive dental assessment including charting and x-ray, age appropriate pre-anesthetic safety blood testing and/or urinalysis, etc.). These items may be "optional" add-on services at other practices, or, in other cases may not even be available at all. We are happy to explain our fees to you any time you have a concern. Comparing apples to apples, we are comfortable that we provide good value to our patients and clients and we know that we charge only what we need to in order to keep our doors open, keep practicing good medicine and keep compensating our staff fairly.