

SMILE PLEASE!

I could smell Samantha sitting in the waiting room long before I saw her and I had a feeling she was going to need some attention to her teeth. Samantha was an 8 year old Yorkshire terrier who had recently moved to the area. Her owner was worried that she was not eating so well and she was drooling a horrible discoloured discharge from her mouth. On examination it was immediately evident she had severe dental disease in most of her teeth and gums. In fact the infection was so bad it had actually spread into her jaw bone. Samantha had been in agony for months but, as she was still eating, her owner had assumed she was alright and thought she just had doggy breath!

You may not know when your dog has toothache. This is part of its ancestry -- in the wild, showing pain would make a dog vulnerable to attack. Today's domestic dogs maintain this instinct, so you have to do your best to watch for signs: changes to eating habits or loss of appetite, unusual night awakenings, rubbing the face against things or facial swelling. However they may show no symptoms at all until the disease is well advanced. Below are a list of common signs and behaviors that may be seen with diseases of the teeth and gums. Dental disease is not simply suffering from "bad breath" -- infections of the gums, teeth, and oral cavity can spread via the bloodstream to the heart and liver, possibly causing additional health problems.

- [Malodorous (bad) breath
- [Drooling, often with foul-smelling saliva
- [Appearance of dental plaque and tartar
- [Reluctance to eat or reduced appetite
- [Teeth that "chatter", especially in cats
- [Tooth loss (other than normal baby tooth loss of young animals)
- [Lethargy or listlessness
- [Discolored teeth
- [Broken / fractured teeth
- [Swelling and / or draining wound below the eye, often caused by a tooth abscess especially in dogs

Periodontal disease is an inflammation of some or all of a tooth's deep supporting structures. Today, it is one of the most common diseases of our pets.

If food particles and bacteria are allowed to accumulate along the pet's gumline, it can form plaque, which, when combined with saliva and minerals, will transform into calculus. This causes gum irritation and leads to an inflammatory condition called *gingivitis*. Gingivitis, which is evidenced by a reddening of the gums directly bordering the teeth, is considered to be an early stage of periodontal disease.

After an extended period, the calculus builds up under the gum and separates it from the teeth. Spaces will form under the teeth, fostering bacterial growth. Once this happens, the dog has irreversible periodontal disease. This usually leads to bone loss, tissue destruction and *pus* formation in the cavities between the gum and teeth. The dog will be in pain, the infection may spread to the jaw bone or other parts of the body, it may lose its teeth and could even die.



Severe periodontal disease. Notice the discolored incisor tooth.

Periodontal disease is infectious, inflammatory and typically progressive. That is why it is important to diagnose and stage this disease to decide on the best treatment options.

Poor Samantha had to have most of her teeth removed under general anaesthetic followed by a long course of antibiotics and recuperation. So don't let your pet end up like Samantha; if you are worried about its teeth get your Veterinary Surgeon to check its mouth. You may save it from months of toothache! They can also advise you on how to look after your dogs teeth to stop them going bad in the first place.

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