



FEATURE



## Taking a Bite out of Dental Disease

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Pet dental care has come a long way in the last 40 years. For decades, dental care was mostly limited to dental extractions and the occasional cleaning. Now, a wide range of services, from dental X-rays to root canals, is available for both dogs and cats.

Despite big strides made in oral health awareness among pet owners, there remain some misconceptions about dental care for pets. Add to this the flood of information available online and it can be tough for pet owners to know what's best for their cat or dog when it comes to maintaining good oral health.

We asked Dr Sandy Manfra Marretta, Professor Emerita at the University of Illinois, and a board-certified veterinary dentist and surgeon, to answer a few questions pet owners may have based on her years of experience as a veterinary dentist and educator.



### What are the most common dental problems diagnosed in dogs and cats?

The most common dental problems affecting dogs and cats include:

- Periodontal disease, especially in smaller breed dogs and in all breeds as they mature.
- In cats, tooth resorptive lesions are very common.
- Cracked teeth in both dogs and cats, with secondary endodontic disease if the dental pulp is exposed.
- Oral tumours, which affect both cats and dogs.



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### What are the most common signs of dental disease in dogs and cats?

There are several things I have encountered, and that I tell owners to look for:

- A pet suddenly becoming head shy (doesn't want you to pet them).
- A pet becoming reluctant to have its mouth looked at or touched.
- Chewing on one side of the mouth or shifting food from one side to the other.
- Blood in saliva, water or the food bowl.
- Odour from the mouth in either a dog or cat is not normal – don't chalk it up to doggy breath!
- Excessive drooling as well as an increase in sneezing or even nasal discharge.
- Two signs more common in cats are reclusive behaviour or picking up food then running from the food bowl due to pain.
- No longer interested in hard treats.

### We know that lots of older pets have dental problems and a concern we hear a lot from people is that they're worried about anaesthesia in their elderly pet. What do you say to your clients when they bring this up?

I always tell people our anaesthetic options for pets are much safer than they were years ago. It's important to work up a patient with appropriate blood work or other necessary tests ahead of time, but many animals, even with underlying conditions, can undergo anaesthesia safely.

### You bring up a good point – how about pets with underlying conditions? Should they even have a dentistry done?

At the teaching hospital, we saw a lot of pets with terrible dental disease and concurrent underlying conditions like kidney or heart disease. You have to work them up properly, but the reality is that you can't leave a pet with a horrible mouth and expect their underlying conditions to improve. I understand that people love their pets, and they worry, but they also don't want their dog or cat to have a poor quality of life. When I look back, there were only a small handful of cases that I thought presented too great a risk to put under anaesthesia.

### You said routine oral exams and cleanings are important, but what can owners do to prevent dental disease?

The gold standard for good dental care in dogs and cats, as in people, is regular teeth brushing. Any owner can learn to do this, but you've got to start early in both cats and dogs. It doesn't mean you can't start brushing an older pet's teeth, but it can be harder if you start later in life.

I also encourage people to start getting oral checkups when their pets are kittens and puppies. Just like in children, it's important that teeth are coming in the way they should be. Missing teeth or unerupted teeth can cause problems later if they are not detected early.

There are certain diets that also are helpful in controlling plaque and calculus (those difficult-to-remove crusty deposits) as well as some treats that can help reduce plaque and tartar. They're not substitutes for routine dental care, but they can help.



## There's a lot of information online about dental care for cats and dogs. What is the most common misconception you've seen or heard from your clients?

I think the idea that anaesthesia is not necessary for a thorough dental evaluation and cleaning is something I hear a lot from clients. Although scaling calculus off the teeth can be cosmetically pleasing, the reality is you simply can't really get into the area under the gum line and in pockets without general anaesthesia. Unfortunately, I've seen lots of patients come in to see me with severe dental disease who've had this type of cleaning for years. The owners wonder why their pet's teeth are falling out when they believe they've been providing adequate dental care.

## If you could tell our audience one thing, what would it be?

Pets need regular professional dental care. A good oral exam should be part of your pet's yearly check-up along with routine dental cleanings. When animals become geriatric, sometimes we recommend checking their oral health every six months to stay on top of problems.

## What are some resources for pet owners wanting to learn more?

Australian Veterinary Association: <https://www.ava.com.au/policy-advocacy/policies/companion-animals-health/guidelines-for-dental-treatment-in-dogs-and-cats/>

Morris Animal Foundation encourages cat and dog owners to work closely with their veterinarian. Appropriate dental care is a great, proactive way to improve the well-being of your pet, now and through their senior years. Get that brush out and make an appointment today with a veterinarian to get your cat's or dog's teeth cleaned. Let's keep them smiling!

Image below: *BEFORE* Cleaning



Image below: *AFTER* Cleaning



## About Morris Animal Foundation

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