

Cheshire Grins!

Proper dental care is crucial to your cat's health. Learn how to care for your pet's teeth.

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It can be life threatening. Bacteria from the mouth and gums can make their way to major organs via the bloodstream, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association. These bacteria can cause infections in the lungs, heart, kidneys and liver, as well as the nervous system. If these infections are not caught and treated in time, they can damage the organs; if they remain untreated, the infections could kill the cat.

Many of these problems can be avoided or reversed with a three-step dental health plan a dental exam including, if needed, a dental cleaning by a veterinarian; a home dental care routine including regular brushing and a nutritious diet; and routine follow-up veterinary care, says the American Veterinary Dental Society.

Periodontal disease is one of the most common dental diseases in cats, says Robert M. Esbensen, DVM. It starts as gingivitis when the gums become irritated, red and swollen. In later stages, these inflamed gums may pull away from the teeth, opening pockets where more bacteria can gather. Eventually, the bacteria attacks tooth roots and bony jaw tissue, causing the teeth to loosen.

Mouth odor is one clue your cat may have periodontal disease, Esbensen says. By that time, the condition may be advanced and the cat in a great deal of pain. Since nature has taught cats to hide pain, you need to check your cat's teeth regularly even if the idea makes you a little nervous, he says. "A lot of people don't want to look in their cat's mouth. But that's the first thing to do."

Look for redness along the gum lines, an indication of gingivitis, Esbensen advises. Also check for yellowish-brown tartar on teeth. Check the mouth regardless of your cat's age. Esbensen has seen 1-year-old cats lose teeth. "Cats of any age can be at risk for dental disease," he says.

Left untreated, periodontal disease will cause the gums to recede and teeth to fall out, says Kenneth F. Lyon, DVM. The cat's mouth will become sensitive and the cat may hypersalivate and rub its face with its paws or against furniture. If you notice any of these symptoms or tartar buildup, take your cat to the veterinarian for an exam.

Feline odontoclastic resorptive lesions (FORL) also known as cervical line lesions or neck lesions may escape early detection by owners as they often start under the gum line. A cat with resorptive lesions may stop eating, but oddly, some may eat even more, DuPont says. The lesions destroy the tooth until no enamel remains and the crown falls off. By the time owners recognize the problem, the tooth may already be seriously damaged. Studies show 28 percent of cats will develop at least one lesion.