

Brushing Up on Dental Health

Help your puppy stay healthy by keeping his teeth in tip-top shape.

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Taking care of your puppy's teeth is a vital part of keeping it healthy. According to the American Veterinary Dental Society, 80 percent of dogs will begin to show signs of oral disease by 3 years of age. Without proper dental care, your puppy's teeth will begin to accumulate bacteria, plaque and tartar, which can lead to bad breath and periodontal disease (gum disease). This bacteria buildup can even affect your dog's overall health as the bacteria enters the bloodstream and taxes the heart, liver and kidneys. Your puppy can't brush his own teeth (wouldn't that be nice?) or tell you if his mouth is hurting, so it's up to you to maintain your puppy's dental health.

Your new puppy should have arrived with all the standard-issue parts and pieces, including 28 milk teeth. They're small, they're white, they're sharp, and just as cute as they can be, but don't expect to admire them for long. By about 8 months of age your puppy's pearlys will have fallen out and been replaced by 42 full-sized fangs. (Puppy teeth usually come in at 4 weeks and start falling out around 3 or 4 months of age, but this varies by breed and individual pup.)

While they last, though, these temporary, or deciduous teeth, will require some attention. Puppy teeth are easily broken, which frequently leads to infection, so you'll need to check for this. It's also important to get your puppy comfortable with having his mouth examined, in order to catch potential problems early and establish good dental habits from the start.

Value of Toothcare

The specialty field of veterinary dentistry has only existed since 1989. Before that, the rule was, if the teeth are bad, pull 'em out. If not, leave 'em alone. Veterinary medicine has come a long way since 1989, but there is still much room for improvement.

Because veterinary dentistry is relatively new, a lot of owners aren't aware of the benefits of dental care. "Lack of education is a big problem," says Clarence Sitzman, D.V.M., president of the American Veterinary Dental Society, and owner of the Front Range Veterinary Clinic in Colorado.

"Periodontal disease is the most commonly diagnosed disease for dogs and cats. It's also the most neglected." (Gum disease is caused by plaque buildup in pockets between the teeth, which decreases the gum's ability to support the tooth and is often accompanied by pain, bleeding and eventual tooth loss.)

Next Step: Best Way to Brush