

SILENT PAIN OF PET DENTAL DISEASE



SYDNEY PET DENTISTRY

- Dr. Christine Hawke -

Copyright

All contents copyright (c) 2011 by Sydney Pet Dentistry. All rights reserved. No part of this document or the related files may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Limit of Liability and Disclaimer of Warranty

The publisher has used its best efforts in preparing this book, and the information provided herein is provided “as is.” Sydney Pet Dentistry makes no representation or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaims any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose and shall in no event be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damage, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Trademarks

This book identifies product names and services known to be trademarks, registered trademarks, or service marks of their respective holders. They are used throughout this book in an editorial fashion only.

In addition, terms suspected of being trademarks, registered trademarks, or service marks have been appropriately capitalized, although Sydney Pet Dentistry cannot attest to the accuracy of this information. Use of a term in this book should not be regarded as affecting the validity of any trademark, registered trademark, or service mark. Sydney Pet Dentistry is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.



Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
Imagine having a toothache or sore mouth and not being able to tell anyone!	2
How to get the most out of this book	2
IS DENTAL DISEASE REALLY SUCH A BIG A DEAL?	3
SEVEN PET DENTISTRY MYTHS - DEBUNKED!	9
MYTH #1: Bad breath is normal in pets.	9
MYTH #2: It is normal for pets to lose teeth as they grow older..	9
MYTH #3: Dogs and cats don't feel pain...	10
MYTH #4: If something was really wrong..	10
MYTH #5: If my pet's mouth was sore...	11
MYTH #6: If my pet is still eating..	12
MYTH #7: Pet dentistry is really an elective ...	12
SO HOW CAN I TELL IF MY PET HAS DENTAL PAIN?	13
Look for potential behavioural changes	13
Trust your sense of smell!	14
'Flip the lip' and look inside	14
I THINK MY PET HAS DENTAL PAIN - WHAT DO I DO NOW?	16
Why does my pet need a general anaesthetic for dental treatment?	16
What if my pet is old? Is it worth the risk?	17
How will my pet cope if teeth are extracted?	17
Won't dental surgery be painful for my pet?	18
HOW CAN I PREVENT MY PET FROM SUFFERING FROM DENTAL PAIN?	19
Establish a dental hygiene routine for your pet	19
Avoid high risk activities eg chewing hard objects	19
Check your pet's mouth regularly for signs of dental disease	20
Schedule regular veterinary dental check-ups for your pet	20
A FINAL WORD	21



INTRODUCTION

Hello and thanks for downloading my book on The Silent Pain of Pet Dental Disease. It is a shocking fact that about 80% of dogs and 50% of cats over the age of three have some form of dental or oral disease which is affecting their health and quality of life.

Periodontal disease is the most common disease affecting our pets, and not only causes local infection and discomfort, but also has widespread effects on the rest of the body. Other dental conditions, such as tooth resorption, broken teeth, and orthodontic problems are also common in pets, and can cause significant pain and suffering.

My name is Christine Hawke, and I am a veterinarian with almost 20 years experience in small animal practice. After many years in general practice, I developed a passion for all things dental, and have been running a small animal dentistry-only service in Sydney since 2007.

I am a Member of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in the field of Veterinary Dentistry (this can only be attained through examination), and am currently undertaking advanced training under the mentorship of Dr David Clarke in Melbourne.



Imagine having a toothache or sore mouth and not being able to tell anyone!

One of the biggest misconceptions is that dental problems don't hurt animals as much as they do in humans. Nothing could be further from the truth! Dogs' and cats' teeth have the same type of nerve supply in their teeth as we do, so anything that hurts us will hurt them as well.



Oral and dental issues frequently go undiagnosed in pets, partly because the disease is hidden deep inside the mouth, and partly because animals are so adept at hiding any signs of pain.

Pets will suffer in silence for as long as they can, and they only stop eating when they cannot bear the pain any longer.

Red, swollen or bleeding gums are uncomfortable. Broken teeth or those with 'holes' in them hurt. These problems cause significant, chronic pain, but the good news is that they can usually be treated quickly and effectively.

All pets deserve to have a healthy, pain-free mouth.

How to get the most out of this book

This book has been written to help you understand how oral and dental problems develop in puppies, what the implications of these issues are, and what options are available to you and your pup to achieve the best outcomes in terms of overall health, comfort and performance.

You don't need to read it from cover to cover, as your dog would need to be pretty unlucky to need all the advice included here! However, I do recommend that you look through the information on what a 'normal' mouth is, as this will help you to understand how each problem can arise.

If you would like to speak to me for advice on your dog, please feel very welcome to call me on 0408 782 611, or you can email me on christine@sydneypetdentistry.com.au.



IS DENTAL DISEASE REALLY SUCH A BIG A DEAL?

Although most pet owners are understandably concerned that their pet may develop a serious, life-threatening illness such as heart disease, kidney failure, cancer or diabetes, many people are totally unaware that their much loved dog or cat may already be suffering silently from significant chronic pain and infection inside their mouth.

In fact, dental disease is by far the most common problem afflicting our pets, with a massive 80% of dogs and cats over three years of age affected. Even puppies and kittens get dental problems, which can cause pain from the moment they get their baby teeth in the first few weeks of life.

Here are four quick facts about the most common dental diseases in pets:

1. Periodontal disease affects about 80% of dogs and 50% of cats over three years of age. It is a chronic bacterial infection which causes destruction of the supporting tissues around the teeth (the gums, ligaments and jawbone).

Red, swollen, bleeding gums are sore. Gum recession and tooth root exposure are signs that the jawbone is being destroyed. In advanced cases, there can be enough bone loss that the the jaw may even break!

Aside from the local infection and discomfort, spread of bacteria through the body is associated with heart, liver and kidney disease.

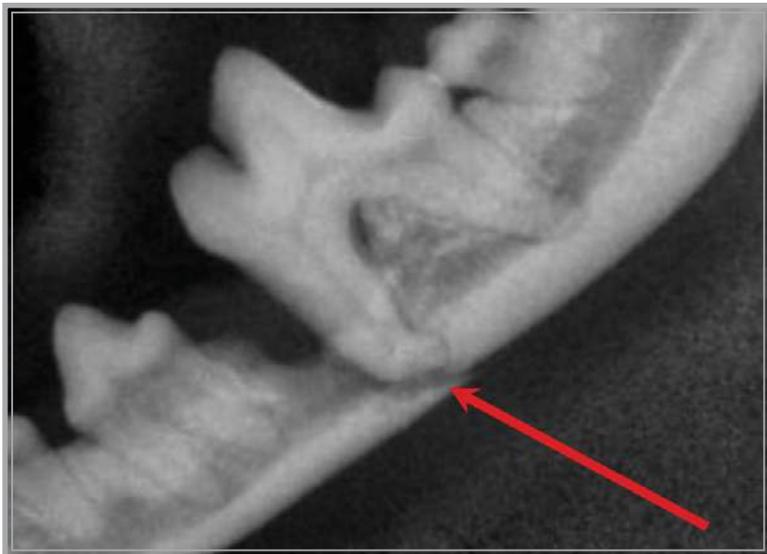


PERIODONTAL DISEASE IN A DOG. NOTE THE SEVERE GUM INFLAMMATION (GINGIVITIS) WITH ULCERS. THERE IS THICK TARTAR ON THE TEETH, AND GUM RECESSON REVEALING THE TOOTH ROOTS - THIS MEANS THERE IS SIGNIFICANT JAWBONE LOSS.





THIS DOG HAS SEVERE PERIODONTAL DISEASE AROUND THE UPPER CANINE TOOTH, WITH PAINFUL GINGIVITIS. A DEEP POCKET OF PUS CAN BE SEEN AROUND THE BASE OF THE TOOTH - THIS IS A COMMON FINDING IN PETS WITH THIS CONDITION.

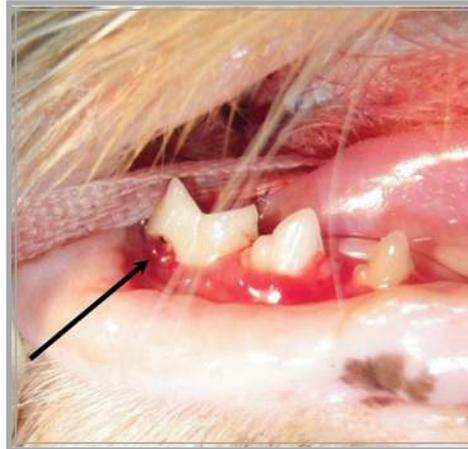


XRAY OF THE LOWER JAW OF A MALTESE TERRIER X WITH SEVERE PERIODONTAL DISEASE. THE JAW HAS BROKEN (ARROW) DUE TO THE BONE LOSS RESULTING FROM UNCONTROLLED PLAQUE ACCUMULATION. THIS DOG WAS SIMPLY PICKING UP A BALL WHEN THE FRACTURE HAPPENED.

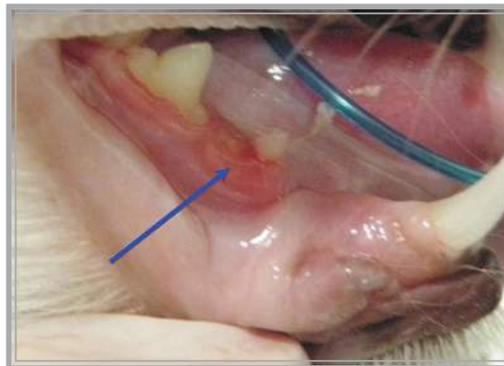


2. Dental resorptive lesions are found lurking in the mouths of 1 in 3 cats. These are deep holes in the teeth, caused by the body's own immune system. While we don't really understand why these holes develop, we do know they are extremely painful.

Although cats are very adept at masking their pain, if we anaesthetise a cat deeply enough to do surgery on it, and touch the teeth lightly with a dental probe, the jaw will chatter and the heart rate will soar due to the intense pain. Extraction of affected teeth offers instant relief.



TOOTH RESORPTION IN A CAT (ARROW). THERE IS A DEEP HOLE IN THE TOOTH, CAUSING EXPOSURE OF THE SENSITIVE NERVE ENDINGS. THESE LESIONS ARE VERY PAINFUL, BUT CAN BE HARD TO DETECT.



A TOOTH ALMOST COMPLETELY DESTROYED BY RESORPTION (ARROW). THE DAMAGED TOOTH WAS ORIGINALLY SIMILAR IN SHAPE TO THE NEIGHBOURING TOOTH.





THE LOWER RIGHT CANINE TOOTH (ARROW) IN THIS CAT HAS SNAPPED OFF DUE TO ADVANCED TOOTH RESORPTION, LEAVING THE HIGHLY SENSITIVE PULP TISSUE EXPOSED.

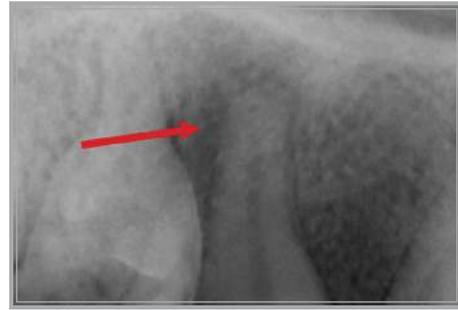
3. Fractured teeth are very common in dogs and cats, and hurt just as they do in humans. If the pulp (living nerve tissue inside the tooth) is exposed, it will die, leaving a wide open pathway for oral bacteria to invade through the tooth deep into the jawbone.

Left untreated, this infection will affect the animal for the rest of its life. Antibiotics alone can't stop the infection as there are always more bacteria invading through the dead tooth. Extraction or root canal therapy are two ways of closing this pathway. Waiting to see what happens is NOT a humane option.



FRESHLY FRACTURED CANINE TOOTH IN A DOG, FOLLOWING A HEAD-ON COLLISION WITH ANOTHER DOG AT THE PARK. THE SENSITIVE PULP TISSUE INSIDE THE TOOTH IS EXPOSED (THE RED DOT). IF TREATED WITHIN THE FIRST 24-48 HOURS WITH A VITAL PULPOTOMY AND CAPPING PROCEDURE, A TOOTH LIKE THIS MAY ACTUALLY BE KEPT ALIVE.





FRACTURED UPPER CARNASSIAL TOOTH IN A DOG, FOLLOWING A KICK TO THE FACE BY A HORSE. THE PULP TISSUE HAS DIED (THE DARK DOT SHOWS THE OPENING INTO THE ROOT CANAL) AND THERE IS AN INFECTION IN THE JAWBONE UNDER THE TOOTH (DARK SHADOW AROUND THE TOOTH ROOT ON THE XRAY; SEE ARROW). EXTRACTION OR ROOT CANAL THERAPY ARE THE ONLY TREATMENT OPTIONS TO STOP THE INFECTION.

4. Orthodontic and developmental problems are also common in pets, particularly dogs, as they have been bred to have different shaped muzzles compared with their wild ancestors.

Poorly positioned teeth can lead to abnormal tooth wear, broken teeth, lip and gum trauma (in some cases we even see holes through the roof of the mouth into the nasal cavity!), chewing problems, chronic pain and persistent infection. Early intervention is important in limiting the damage.



Lower Canine Striking Palate



Trauma To Palate

SEVEN MONTH OLD PUPPY WITH A 'BASE NARROW' CANINE TOOTH. THE LOWER CANINE IS PUNCTURING THE GUM ON THE ROOF OF THE MOUTH. THE DOG IS FORCED TO BITE ITSELF EVERY TIME IT CLOSES ITS MOUTH.



CHRONIC DAMAGE TO THE HARD PALATE, UPPER CANINE AND LATERAL INCISOR TOOTH IN AN ADULT DOG WITH AN OVERSHOT JAW. THE HOLE IN THE HARD PALATE HAS BEEN CAUSED BY THE LOWER CANINE TOOTH, AND IS FILLED WITH INFECTED DEBRIS.



You might well ask how, if so many pets have painful or infected mouths, a problem this big can go largely undetected? How could so many of us miss this amount of disease in our close companions? My answer is that, when it comes to pet dental disease, there is a lot of misunderstanding and misinformation around. To be able to determine if your pet is suffering from dental disease, first we need to sort the dental truth from fiction.



SEVEN PET DENTISTRY MYTHS - DEBUNKED!

I am often surprised (and deeply saddened) by some of the myths I come across in the field of pet dentistry. These range from the types of treatment that can or should be performed, through to whether dental problems need treating at all. These misunderstandings mean that many pets do not get the standard of dental treatment they deserve.

The seven myths I most frequently hear are:

MYTH #1: Bad breath is normal in pets.

Bad breath, while common in pets, is NOT normal. In the vast majority of patients with bad breath, what we are smelling is infection and pus in the mouth. Pet breath should NOT be offensive.



While we occasionally find other reasons for bad breath (such as digestive upsets, or diseases such as diabetes and kidney disease), by far and away the most common cause is oral infection. If your pet doesn't smell sweet, then there is a very high chance that something is very wrong with their mouth!

Dogs and cats have a much more developed sense of smell and taste than humans - so if we think their breath stinks, imagine how they feel having to live with the smell and taste of pus in their mouths 24 hours a day!

MYTH #2: It is normal for pets to lose teeth as they grow older..

Healthy animals do NOT lose teeth as a normal part of ageing. We see the evidence of this in people - with improvements in human dental care, many people keep



DENTAL XRAY SHOWING THE LONG, SPLOYED ROOTS ON A DOG'S TEETH. THESE ARE DESIGNED TO ANCHOR THE TEETH INTO THE JAW FOR LIFE.

their teeth for eight or more decades now, as opposed to previous generations who lost many teeth by middle age.

Dogs and cats also have teeth designed to stay in their mouths for life, otherwise they would not be able to hunt, and they would die very quickly from starvation. We frequently see pets living into their mid to late teens now, and with good oral care most can certainly be expected to keep their teeth for life.





ROOT EXPOSURE DUE TO PERIODONTAL DISEASE IN A DOG. THIS DOG HAS LOST A SERIOUS AMOUNT OF JAWBONE, YET THE TEETH ARE STILL IN PLACE. TO LOSE THESE TEETH 'NATURALLY', HER BONE LOSS MUST CONTINUE EVEN FURTHER.

To withstand the pressures of hunting, dog and cat teeth have very long roots embedded deep into the jawbone. For a tooth to 'just fall out' there has to be significant destruction to this bone and the ligaments holding the tooth in its socket (just ask your vet how hard it is to extract a healthy tooth!). Losing teeth is definitely NOT a normal or healthy part of aging.

MYTH #3: Dogs and cats don't feel pain the same way that we do.

If something is uncomfortable, unpleasant, or painful for us, it is also just as painful for our pets. Dog and cat teeth have similar innervation to our own (in fact, they have around 60% more of the highly sensitive nerve endings in their teeth as we do!). Therefore it is only logical that they feel dental pain at least as much as we do. Most people who have experienced dental pain know it is one of the worst types of pain you can suffer from. And it is certainly no different for a dog or cat. They just don't whinge about it like we do.

MYTH #4: If something was really wrong, surely I would see something!

The reason that so much oral disease goes unnoticed is that it is hidden deep inside the mouth, in the dark. Lumps, bumps, wounds, rashes etc are easy to detect when they are displayed on the outside of the body.

If your dog is limping or your cat has a draining abscess, you can see this and know it isn't normal. You know they are sore or unhealthy, and that it is time to get them treated.



Pets with sore mouths don't walk around with their mouth open trying to attract attention. If anything, the more painful the mouth is, the less likely they are to tolerate a person handling it and looking inside. Even vets may have trouble looking in a pet's mouth without sedation or anaesthesia if it is particularly sore.

Even if you do get to look inside the mouth, how do you know what is normal? As we now know, the majority of animals have disease in their mouths, so even if you compare your pet with a friend's pet, there is an odds-on chance they will have problems too.



A NORMAL HEALTHY MOUTH IN AN ADULT DOG
(COPYRIGHT AVDC, USED WITH PERMISSION)

MYTH #5: If my pet's mouth was sore, surely he or she would let me know.

It is natural to expect that our pets, who live with us, play with us, and even sleep with us, would tell us if something was wrong. You know your pet better than anyone, so you would think you'd know something was wrong. Right?

Unfortunately, dogs and cats can't talk. And if they could, I'm not so sure they would tell us if they have a sore mouth. In the wild (and let's face it, even the sweetest pet has a touch of wild instinct in them!), if an animal reveals any weakness, it can suddenly go from being the predator to being the prey.

Dogs are pack animals, and it isn't a good survival tactic to let the rest of the pack know you are weak or unable to do your fair share of hunting. At best, you might get demoted to the bottom of the pack. At worst, you might be left to fend for yourself. If you are already having pain when hunting or eating, this is the last thing you can risk happening.



MYTH #6: If my pet is still eating, he or she can't really be in dental pain.

This is the myth that probably causes more pets to be left suffering in silence than any other. Dogs and cats with severe oral pain WILL continue to eat. They will continue to eat until the pain of eating is so excruciating that they cannot bear to eat anymore. They will continue to eat until starvation seems like the better option.

If you notice your pet is avoiding chewing, or unable to eat harder foods, they have reached the point where they cannot hide their pain or weakness any longer. Waiting for your pet to stop eating altogether due to oral pain may mean weeks or months of severe suffering.

MYTH #7: Pet dentistry is really an elective or cosmetic procedure.

Nothing could be further from the truth! Extraction of broken, damaged or loose teeth, one of the most common surgical procedures in pets, is often the fastest way to relieve serious dental pain.

Options such as root canal therapy and periodontal surgery may allow damaged, painful teeth to be saved. Orthodontic treatment (yes, dogs and cats can wear braces!) is not designed for cosmetic reasons to give a pet a 'Hollywood Smile', but reserved for cases where badly positioned teeth are causing pain, damage to the teeth, gums, or palate, or the pet can't eat comfortably.



PETS DON'T NEED A 'HOLLYWOOD SMILE' - IN FACT, THEY'D LOOK PRETTY WEIRD IF THEY TRIED!

Even the common procedure of scaling and polishing (to remove plaque and tartar) is not an elective procedure. Removal of these infected substances from the mouth is a critical step in controlling periodontal disease, which can cause local pain and tissue destruction, as well as systemic illness, if left untreated.



SO HOW CAN I TELL IF MY PET HAS DENTAL PAIN?

As we now know, we can't rely on our pets to tell us they have oral pain. They won't willingly tell us, and we certainly can't assume all is well just because they are still managing to eat. We need to actively detect the hidden problems that may be causing our pets to suffer in silence.

If we cannot rely on our pets to tell us when they are suffering, how do we find out?

Look for potential behavioural changes

While pets will try and hide their pain, there can be some obvious, and not so obvious, behavioural changes when they have reached a point where they are struggling to disguise their discomfort. These include:

- Appearing hungry (for example approaching the food bowl) but not eating
- Dropping food or having difficulty chewing or swallowing
- Rubbing or pawing at the mouth
- Crying, aggression or avoidance when the mouth is handled

In many cases, the behavioural changes are more subtle and, as they can develop slowly over time, they are often not noticed until the pet has proper dental treatment and the pain is taken away.



It is VERY common for owners to tell me with much excitement how great their pets feel after dental surgery, that they seem so much younger, happier and more energetic. My belief is that, while it is hard for a pet to tell us when they have dental pain, they sure know how to thank us when they feel better!



Trust your sense of smell!

If we can't always rely on behaviour changes to alert us to problems, we can rely on our sense of SMELL. If the breath smells bad, then it is HIGHLY likely there is something wrong inside the mouth.

Normal dog or cat breath is like normal human breath. It should not be offensive - if it is then there what we are usually smelling is infection, pus, rotten egg gas (which is commonly produced by oral bacteria), rotting food or dead tissue.

'Flip the lip' and look inside

There are some reliable tell-tale visible signs that your pet has oral disease, including the following:

- Red, swollen or bleeding gums
- Ulcers, swellings or lumps or in the mouth
- Build-up of dirty deposits on the teeth (plaque, tartar, stains) - especially if there are areas with more tartar than others (this may be a clue that your pet is not chewing on those teeth)
- Loose or missing teeth
- Broken, damaged, worn or discoloured teeth
- Damage to the gums, palate, tongue or lips
- Gum recession and exposure of the tooth roots
- Excessive drooling, especially if it is bloodstained or discoloured



'FLIPPING THE LIP' IN THIS DOG REVEALED A LONG-STANDING ORTHODONTIC PROBLEM. SHE HAS A BADLY OVERSHOT JAW, AND HER LOWER CANINE TEETH ARE DAMAGING THE ROOF OF HER MOUTH. THE DAMAGE TO HER UPPER CANINE TEETH IS SO BAD THAT THESE TEETH HAVE DIED AND BECOME INFECTED. SHE IS EIGHT YEARS OLD, AND WOULD HAVE HAD THIS PROBLEM SINCE THE TEETH ERUPTED AT SIX MONTHS OF AGE. SHE IS STILL EATING.



If you see one or more of these signs, your pet should be checked by a vet as soon as possible. It is important to note that, even for vets with advanced dental training, it can be difficult to fully examine a dog or cat's mouth, especially if it is sore or your pet is not used to having its mouth opened.

Sometimes sedation or anaesthesia may be required to even look inside an animal's mouth if there is a lot of pain. It can make oral examination in these cases less frightening and more humane.



I THINK MY PET HAS DENTAL PAIN - WHAT DO I DO NOW?

If you suspect your pet has oral pain or infection, you should seek veterinary attention as soon as possible. Most dental problems can be treated quickly, effectively and humanely. In most cases, this will require general anaesthesia, as most dental problems cannot be adequately treated with medications alone.



Why does my pet need a general anaesthetic for dental treatment?

While many owners are naturally fearful of their pet being anaesthetised, modern anaesthetic agents are much safer than the ones we had access to in the past. Anaesthesia is usually required because:

- It is impossible to thoroughly examine all 42 teeth in a dog and 30 teeth in a cat, on all sides, above and below the gum level, on an awake animal. Even the best behaved pets will not sit still with their mouths open like we do at the dentist. And getting them to hold an xray film in their mouth is definitely asking too much!
- For the pet's sake, we need to be able to do their examination and treatment humanely, without causing fear or pain. Proper dental cleaning (scaling) requires the use of instruments below the gumline - anything less is not good enough, as it is actually the plaque and tartar below the gumline that causes all of the damage. And imagine expecting a dog or cat to sit still while a sore tooth is extracted, or a root canal is performed (it is hard enough for a person to sit still through this!).



PERFORMING DENTAL TREATMENT ON ONE OF MY OWN CATS, STEVE, UNDER GENERAL ANAESTHESIA.

Performing dental treatment on one of my own cats, Steve, under general anaesthesia.



What if my pet is old? Is it worth the risk?



Understandably, owners of older pets are often very worried about the risk of anaesthesia.

Firstly, it is important to remember that, if there is dental pain or infection, elderly animals suffer just as much as younger ones. It doesn't hurt any less because they are old.

Secondly, age is not a disease, and not a reason to withhold treatment. While it is true that some diseases are more likely to develop as an animal ages, with careful assessment and planning prior to anaesthesia (for example, checking heart function and detecting potential problems with liver and kidney function via blood and urine testing), the risk of an anaesthetic complication can almost always be well managed.

Indeed, as dental disease in pets increases with age, a significant proportion of our patients are elderly. If anything, it is amazing how many owners tell us that their pets seem 'years younger' once their oral disease has been fixed.

How will my pet cope if teeth are extracted?

Treatment options for dental problems in pets are quite similar to those in people. While advanced procedures to save damaged teeth, such as root canal therapy, may be suitable in some situations, in other cases extraction of diseased teeth is the best option.

Contrary to popular belief, pet dogs and cats can eat very well, and live full and happy lives, without all of their teeth (and, in many cases, with no teeth at all!).

There is no single tooth that a pet needs to survive. This includes the large canines (fangs) and carnassial teeth (big cheek teeth).

In the wild, a dog or cat missing these major teeth would certainly be at a significant disadvantage, as they are needed for hunting and self-protection. However, our pets don't need to hunt for their food (we do this for them) or protect themselves (if we keep them safe).

Pets which are suffering from oral pain will actually eat with renewed gusto once they have the sore teeth removed or treated. In fact, I have many patients with



NO teeth that now eat whatever they like, including hard food, and some of these even still love to hunt (though not always very effectively!).

Won't dental surgery be painful for my pet?

Firstly, remember that without treatment, your pet will continue to have chronic dental pain. Anyone who has had a toothache knows how this feels. While surgery can be a painful experience, we can effectively manage this using a combination of medications, including different types of painkillers which can be used before, during and after surgery.

Local nerve blocks (similar to when you have a needle at the dentist to numb part of your mouth) are also used to prevent pain on recovery, and to decrease the depth of general anaesthetic an animal needs during surgery.

I always assume that if something would hurt me, it will hurt my patients, so I give them the type of pain relief I would expect for myself.

Indeed, with proper pain management, it is actually normal for our patients to be eating comfortably within hours of dental surgery, including extensive extractions.



HOW CAN I PREVENT MY PET FROM SUFFERING FROM DENTAL PAIN?

We can't always stop dogs and cats from injuring themselves or developing dental problems, but there are a few things we can do to reduce the risk of them suffering from chronic dental pain.

Establish a dental hygiene routine for your pet

Just as we care for our own teeth by brushing, flossing and rinsing, we can help keep plaque bacteria from accumulating on our pets' teeth. Many dogs, and even cats, can be trained to accept (and even enjoy!) toothbrushing. Done daily, this can really make a huge difference to their dental, and overall, health.

The trick with toothbrushing is to start slowly, make it fun rather than a chore, and reward them for good behaviour. A dental check with your vet is a good idea before you start, as any pre-existing dental issues will make brushing painful.

Brushes need to be soft, and pet toothpaste (or even just water) should be used rather than human toothpaste (this is not designed to be swallowed, and most pets can't master the rinse-and-spit routine).



Other options for controlling plaque and tartar include chewing appropriate diets and treats, and using oral rinses designed for dogs and cats. For more information on different types of dental care, including some handy hints on teaching your pet to enjoy toothbrushing, head to www.sydneypetdentistry.com.au and check out the information sheets in the 'Pet Owners' section.

Avoid high risk activities eg chewing hard objects

While chewing can help keep the teeth clean, some objects are just not designed to go into your pet's mouth. Every week I see broken and damaged teeth, and while sometimes this is due to an unforeseeable accident (such as being hit by a car, or falling off a balcony), in most cases it is due to chewing objects which are too hard or too inflexible.





Common culprits include bones, sticks, rocks and hard toys. Some dogs can such things for years without problems, but many do break their teeth, especially the upper carnassial teeth (the big cheek teeth near the back of the mouth). The carnassial teeth are like scissors, and if something is too hard for them to cut, and the pet keeps

trying to chew it, something has to eventually give (and, sadly, it is all too often the teeth!). By choosing chew treats which are softer and more flexible, the risk of dental damage can be minimised.



FRACTURED UPPER CARNASSIAL TOOTH IN A DOG, DUE TO CHEWING BONES. THE PULP (LIVING TISSUE INSIDE THE TOOTH) IS DEAD AND THERE IS A DEEP INFECTION IN THE JAWBONE. THE SURROUNDING GUM IS RED AND SWOLLEN. THIS TOOTH HAS BEEN BROKEN AND INFECTED FOR AT LEAST A FEW MONTHS, YET THE DOG IS STILL EATING. OTHERWISE IT WILL STARVE.

Check your pet's mouth regularly for signs of dental disease

As your pet is unlikely to tell you if he or she has dental pain, you need to be vigilant and check regularly for signs of dental disease. While some diseases aren't preventable with our current knowledge (for example tooth resorption in cats), at least you will be able to detect them and get appropriate treatment before your pet suffers for very long.

Schedule regular veterinary dental check-ups for your pet

Dental check-ups are usually performed as part of your pet's annual physical examination. In some animals, including older animals and breeds which are predisposed to dental issues, more frequent dental examinations may be warranted. Just like humans, periodic professional scaling and polishing of the teeth may be required to control or prevent periodontal disease.



A FINAL WORD

Despite the fact that dental disease often ‘flies under the radar’, it is a very common cause of pain and reduced quality of life in our pets. We all want the best for them, and working with your vet to keep their mouths healthy and free of pain and infection is a critical part of responsible pet ownership.

If you have any questions about dental disease, or your own pet, please feel very welcome to call me on 0408 782 611, or email me at christine@sydneypetdentistry.com.au. Together we can make sure your pet has the healthy, comfortable mouth it deserves.

