



Dental Disease in Cats

Overview

- Dental disease is a painful and very common condition in cats, especially as they get older.
- Most cats hide their pain and continue to eat if they have dental disease, so it's important to check their mouth regularly, and have their teeth examined by your vet at least once a year.
- Dental disease can sometimes lead to other problems such as kidney and heart disease.
- Fortunately, there are plenty of things you can do to keep your cat's mouth healthy throughout their life.

What causes dental disease in cats?

Dental disease is a relatively common problem for cats, and becomes more likely as they get older. Dental disease is also more common in pedigree cats, cats that are fed an inappropriate diet (high in sugar), cats that never have their teeth brushed, and cats that have retained baby teeth.

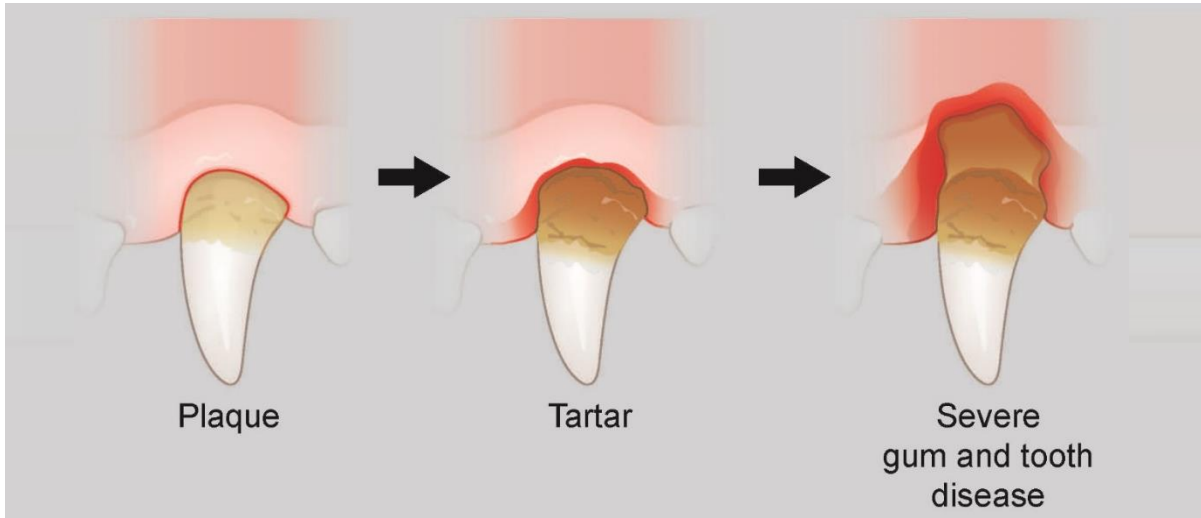
Symptoms

Symptoms of dental disease in cats tend to include:

- [Bad breath](#)
- [Mouth pain](#)
- [Reduced appetite](#)
- [Weight loss](#)
- Difficulty eating (chewing on one side/preferring soft food)
- Drooling
- Visible tartar
- Red, sore, bleeding gums
- [Wobbly teeth](#)
- Swelling around the face, jaw, or cheeks
- Grooming less (due to mouth pain)

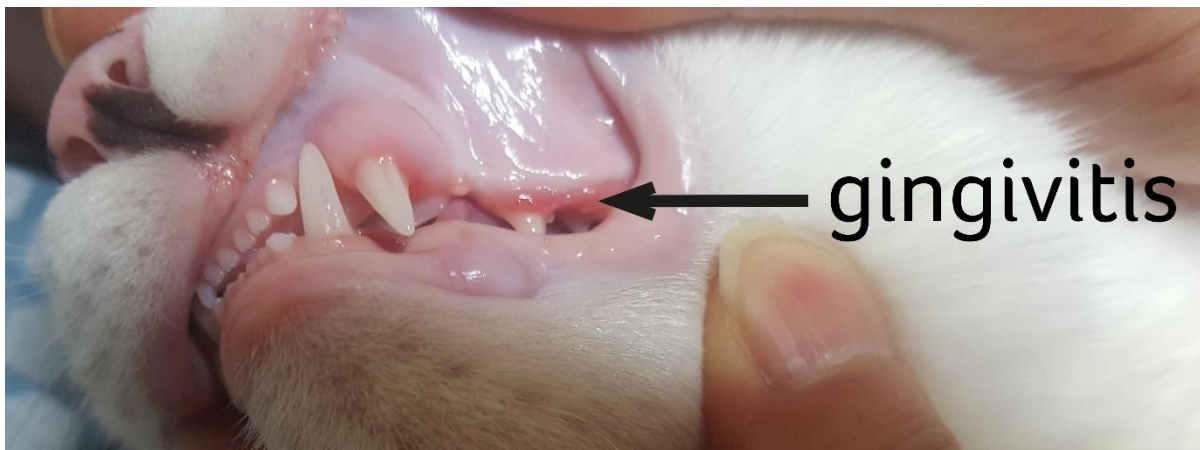


Plaque and tartar build up



Plaque is a soft mix of saliva, food, and bacteria that builds up on teeth throughout the day. If plaque isn't removed regularly, it will turn into a hard substance called tartar. Tartar causes [gingivitis](#) (inflammation of the gums), and is full of bacteria that can enter the bloodstream and cause problems such as [kidney disease](#) and [heart disease](#).

Gingivitis



Gingivitis is inflammation of the gums that causes pain, redness and bleeding. It is most commonly caused by tartar build up, but can also be as a result of conditions such as [Cat flu](#), [FIV](#) and [FeLV](#). In severe cases, gingivitis can affect the whole mouth, which we call gingivostomatitis.



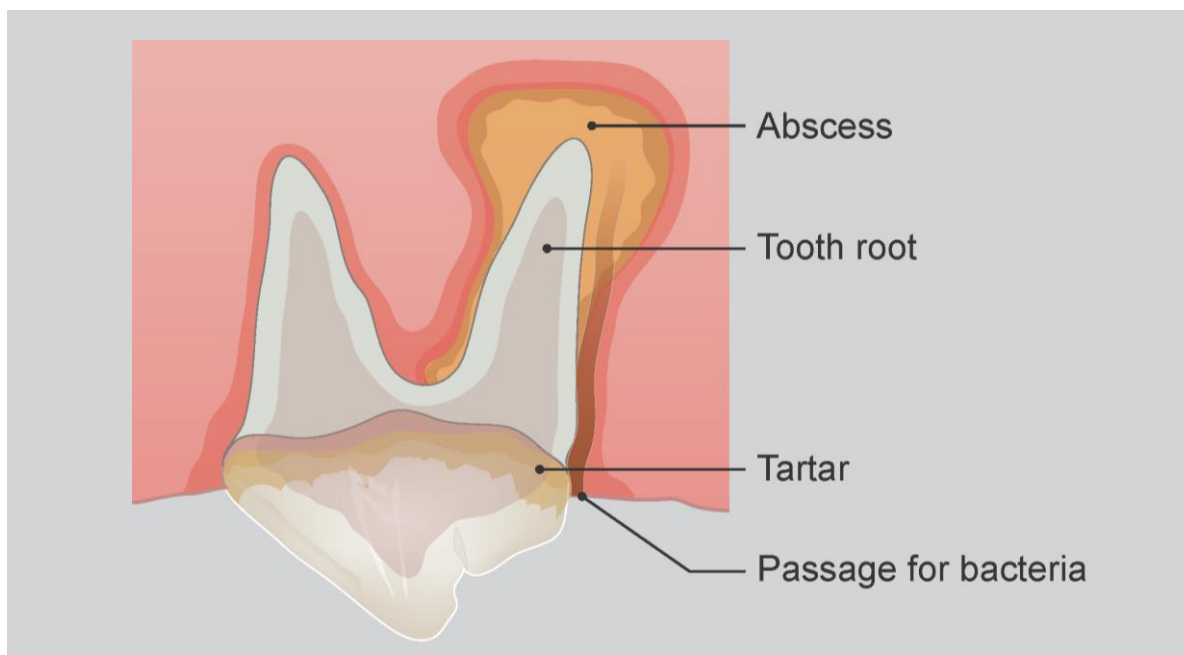
Gingivostomatitis

Gingivostomatitis is a severe form of gingivitis that causes inflammation of the whole mouth. It tends to be triggered if the immune system overreacts to another problem, such as plaque, tartar, [Cat flu](#), [FIV](#) and [FeLV](#).

Feline resorptive lesions

Feline resorptive lesions (FORLs) are holes in the teeth that develop just along the gum line. FORLs cause the teeth to become weak and snap off at the gum line, leaving just the root behind – which is very painful. If your cat has teeth with FORLs, it's likely that your vet will recommend removing them under anaesthetic. FORLs are an extremely common problem and affect more than a third of pet cats at some point throughout their life.

Tooth root abscesses



A tooth root abscess is a painful infection around a tooth root (see image above). Tooth root abscesses tend to form if there is something else wrong with a tooth that means bacteria can get under the gum. Tooth root abscesses usually cause a swelling on one side of the face, just under the eye.

Treatment usually involves antibiotics and in severe cases, tooth removal.



Broken teeth

Broken teeth tend to be very painful because the inside of each tooth contains a nerve. Once a tooth is damaged, infections and tooth root abscesses are much more likely so it's often necessary to remove it.

Retained baby teeth



Retained baby teeth cause the mouth to become overcrowded, which means food and bacteria gets trapped, leading to the build-up of plaque and tartar. If your cat has any baby teeth remaining after 6 months old, your vet might recommend removing them under anaesthetic.

Treatment

Treatment for dental disease depends on problem in hand, but typically includes some of the following:

- [Anti-inflammatory pain relief](#) – to keep your cat comfortable.
- [Antibiotics](#) – to fight infection (not always necessary).
- **Scale and polish** – if your vet spots plaque and tartar build-up, they may recommend a 'scale and polish' to prevent further problems developing – similar to a professional clean you would get from your own dentist (but needs to be done under anaesthetic).
- **Tooth removal** – if your cat has severe dental disease they may need teeth removed. This is to stop pain, prevent the jaw bones from



becoming infected, and to help stop other teeth rotting. Fortunately, cats adapt incredibly well to having teeth removed.

Outlook and prevention



To keep your cat's mouth as healthy as possible, you'll need to give them a bit of help with their dental hygiene.

Tooth brushing: If your cat will allow it, brushing their teeth is by far the best way to keep their mouth healthy, because it removes plaque before it turns into tartar. It's easier if your cat gets used to having their teeth brushed as a kitten, but older cats can learn, too. Follow these simple steps:

1. Get some cat-safe toothpaste (not human toothpaste), and a cat toothbrush or microfiber finger cloth for tooth cleaning.
2. Give your cat a little of the toothpaste on your finger around the same time every day. This will get them used to the routine, taste, and smell. If they won't take it from your finger, offer it to them in their food bowl, or put a small spot of it on their front leg so they lick it off – then work up to feeding it on your finger.
3. Get them used to having their lips lifted, starting by gently touching the side of their mouth (avoiding their whiskers), and gradually build up to lifting their lips – give them lots of treats before and afterwards, so they think of it as a positive experience.
4. Once they are comfortable with having their lips lifted, start gently touching their teeth and gums, rewarding them with lots of treats.
5. When they are happy with that, you can start to introduce a little toothpaste on your finger.
6. Next, use the toothbrush, making small, circular motions on the outer surfaces of the teeth. Always brush gently and not directly on their gums.



7. If your cat shows signs of pain, or their gums look sore or bleed when you are brushing, stop the process speak to your vet for further advice.
- **Cat mouthwash:** Special pet-friendly mouthwash added to your cat's drinking water may help reduce the build-up of plaque. Never use human mouthwash for your pets.
 - **Dental gel:** Dental gels contain enzymes and mild abrasives that can help to prevent the build-up of plaque. It can be applied by rubbing it directly onto the teeth and gums, but if this isn't possible, you can try to encourage your cat to lick it off your finger/their own paw. Dental gels aren't as effective as brushing your cat's teeth, but are a good alternative if your cat won't tolerate anything else.
 - **Diet:** Feeding your cat the right diet can really help keep their mouth healthy. If possible, try to feed your cat a mix of wet food and biscuits, as the chewing required to eat biscuits helps to remove some of the plaque that builds up on their teeth throughout the day. Try to keep sugary human foods and treats to a minimum. If your cat is prone to dental problems, your vet can recommend a special dental diet designed to stop the build-up of plaque. [For more information, read our advice on the best diet for your cat.](#)
 - **Check-ups:** Regular dental check-ups with your vet will help prevent problems becoming serious. A good time for a check is at their yearly booster vaccination.
 - **Dental treats:** You can buy dental treats for cats designed to help keep their teeth clean. These are fine as an occasional treat, but you shouldn't rely on them for your cat's dental health.

Cost

Dental disease can cost several hundred pounds (this varies a lot depending on the problem). Always speak to your vet if you can't afford the treatment they have recommended because there may be another option. We strongly recommend [insuring your cat](#) as soon as you get them so you are covered for any future problems. Always check if your insurance policy covers dental disease because some don't.

Am I eligible for PDSA veterinary treatment?



When to contact your vet

Book an appointment with your vet if you think your cat might have dental disease. Your vet will be able to examine inside his/her mouth, which we know can be tricky at home! Contact your vet for an urgent appointment if your cat is unable to close his/her mouth, or has [stopped eating](#).

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