

Healthy Teeth Means a Healthy Norfolk Terrier

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Introduction

Bad teeth in the dog causes toothache, just as it does in humans. The dog, however, hides it well and can carry on with life as if nothing's matter. This happens with even excruciating dental pain. They do this by 'normalising' the pain, ie they accept the pain as normal. We should be most unhappy, thinking our dear Norfolk might be in pain.

The pain is caused by the build-up of tartar, inflammation of the gums (gingivitis), infection, including abscesses, and disrupted periodontal membranes (periodontitis). Dogs very rarely develop caries, the way humans do, so do not suffer true tooth decay. The periodontal membrane helps to secure the tooth to the gum tissue, and when it is diseased the tooth becomes loose, painful, and might eventually fallout.

Disturbance in the occlusion is caused by these loose and missing teeth can also result in ulcers on the tongue and the inside of the cheeks, and even the tongue.

And then, there is the halitosis. To appease the guilt felt by dog owners when the vet notices, I always say: '*bad breath is better than no breath at all, so not let's see what we can do about it, starting now.*'

What can you do?

- ≡ You can start off by preventing the situation. A puppy with a 'correct bite' is less likely to experience dental disease as an adult dog, but that is a topic for a different article. A very good idea is to get your puppy used to having its teeth cleaned. You do this by opening its mouth regularly, rubbing it teeth, and pretending to brush them

(with your fingers). This means that when the times come for proper brushing/cleaning, it is no surprise to the dog.

- ≡ It is a fact that when dogs ate bones and hides/skins they suffered almost no gum disease. And dogs that live 'rough', or as strays, are less likely to suffer gum disease. We live different lives with our dogs, however, and dental disease is extremely commonly seen in veterinary practice. It is a fact that most are diagnosed at the time of booster vaccinations, when your dog is examined from nose to tail as part of the visit. Teeth are rescued, pain alleviated or prevented, and the consequences of dental disease minimised.
- ≡ You can prevent the situation by good dental health. There is a lot of contradictory advice out there, however. Some veterinary academics, toothpaste manufacturers, and sale reps recommend twice daily brushing of teeth. These nice people have obviously never had dogs themselves. In addition, human dentist colleagues of mine say that it is a problem getting people to brush their *own* teeth twice daily.

A percentage of dog owners manage once or twice weekly, but the majority almost never.

So, my advice, being realistic, is: brush/clean your dog's teeth once or twice a week. Use proprietary *dog* toothpaste of any kind because it is of the correct pH and is more readily accepted by the dog. Most are poultry or beef flavoured rather than spearmint. Use either a tooth brush (and it does not have to be a special dog tooth brush, so long as it feels comfortable in the dog's mouth and your hand while doing it) or an abrasive cloth or swab. Do not worry if you notice a little blood.

There are diets that promote dental health. These usually have a higher fibre content, and contain substances that help limit plaque and tartar build-up.

What do *I* do at home?

To be completely honest, I manage only every few weeks. I've trained our dogs to accept me scraping the teeth with dental tools (even below the gum line), and then polishing with Prophypaste using a woven swab. Prophypaste is the professional material that the human dental hygienist uses in the human mouth (in those little rubber cup at the end of the drill). It is abrasive and 'fills in' tiny imperfections in the enamel. I usually succeed in getting rid of all build-up this way.

Consequences of poor dental health

- ≡ Pain. Remember, your dog tolerates this pain without letting you know.
- ≡ Loss of teeth. Sometimes, however, they seem to lose incisors (especially the lower ones) no matter what you do.
- ≡ Tartar produces toxins. Toxins are dealt with by the liver and kidneys, and these organs can become burdened by it in the dog's old age. In some very old dogs, this may even be the cause of death.
- ≡ Chronic (in other words, long-standing) gum infection generates antibody-antigen complexes in the blood stream. These can 'clog' up the fine tubules in the kidneys and contribute to chronic kidney disease.

≡ Acute and chronic gum infections can both cause infection of heart valves and heart linings (valvular endocarditis), which sometimes causes heart murmurs and heart disease. In old dogs it is possible to assert that some murmurs may have been caused by dental disease.

Conclusion

Healthy teeth, therefore, means a healthy dog. Keeping their teeth clean is a good idea. When in doubt, contact your veterinary practice. Some offer free dental checks by the vet or the nurse.

Your dog will thank you for it, and you might your Norfolk Terrier for longer.