

Recognizing the Signs: How to Tell If Your Dog or Cat Has Tooth Pain



As responsible pet owners, we strive to ensure the health and well-being of our furry companions. While we may be vigilant about their diet, exercise, and regular veterinary check-ups, one aspect of their health that can sometimes go unnoticed is dental care. Dental health for pets is crucial because, just like humans, dogs and cats can experience dental issues, including painful, infected, and broken teeth, which can cause discomfort and impact their overall quality of life. In today's blog, we'll discuss how to recognize the signs of tooth pain in your dog or cat and what steps you can take to address it.

Understanding Dental Health in Pets

Before we delve into the signs of tooth pain, it's essential to understand the importance of dental health in pets. Dogs and cats rely on their teeth not only for eating but also for grooming, playing, and carrying objects. Dental problems such as periodontal disease, tooth decay, and oral infections can cause pain and discomfort, leading to a range of issues if left untreated.

Signs of Tooth Pain in Dogs and Cats

- 1. Drooling and Pawing at the Mouth:** Excessive drooling or pawing at the mouth can be a sign of oral discomfort in pets. They may be trying to alleviate pain or irritation caused by tooth pain or other dental issues.
- 2. Bad Breath:** While it's normal for pets to have some level of "doggy" or "kitty" breath, persistent bad breath can be a sign of underlying dental problems. Foul-smelling breath may indicate the presence of bacteria or infection in the mouth.
- 4. Changes in Behavior:** Pets experiencing dental pain may exhibit changes in behavior, such as irritability, restlessness, or lethargy. They may also become more withdrawn or reluctant to interact with their owners.
- 5. Visible Signs of Dental Issues:** In some cases, you may be able to visually identify dental problems in your pet, such as broken or loose teeth, discolored teeth, or visible tartar buildup on the teeth.

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A Note on Changes in Eating Habits

It takes a tremendous amount of pain to deter most pets from eating. Eating is a natural instinct for survival, and animals are remarkable at overcoming pain or discomfort to satisfy this basic need. If you observe sudden reluctance to eat, difficulty picking up and/or chewing food, dropping food from their mouth, or chewing on one side of their mouth, it may indicate a dental issue. Additionally, asymmetry of tartar build-up (i.e., more on one side of the mouth) can be a sign something isn't right. While dental disease isn't typically a primary cause for animals to stop eating, it can contribute. If your pet is not eating or shows signs of disinterest in food, make an appointment to see your veterinarian right away.

What to Do If You Suspect Tooth Pain

If you suspect that your dog or cat is experiencing tooth pain or dental issues, it's essential to seek veterinary care promptly. Your veterinarian may perform an initial awake dental examination to identify an obvious source of pain. However, to fully and thoroughly assess your pet's oral health, general anesthesia is required as most animals do not willingly allow for an in-depth oral examination or imaging (i.e., intraoral X-rays). General anesthesia allows for a Comprehensive Oral Health Assessment and Treatment (COHAT) of your pet's mouth. Once the anesthetized exam and complete oral imaging (full mouth X-rays +/- cone beam computed tomography) and cleaning have been performed, the underlying cause(s) of their discomfort can be identified and addressed.

Depending on the severity of the dental problem, treatment options may include tooth extraction, root planing, and/or referral to a veterinary dental specialist. Your primary veterinarian may also provide recommendations for at-home dental care, such as regular tooth brushing, dental chews, or special diets designed to promote oral health.

Preventing Dental Problems in Pets

Prevention is key when it comes to maintaining your pet's dental health. In addition to regular veterinary check-ups, there are several steps you can take to help prevent dental issues in your dog or cat:

- 1. Brush Your Pet's Teeth:** Get into the habit of brushing your pet's teeth regularly using a pet-friendly toothbrush and toothpaste. Aim to brush their teeth daily or at least 3-4 times a week to remove disease-causing plaque and tartar buildup.
- 2. Provide Dental Chews and Toys:** Offer your pet dental chews or toys designed to promote dental health by reducing plaque and tartar buildup. These products can help keep your pet's teeth clean and healthy between professional cleanings. Make sure you choose appropriate chew toys—anything that you cannot indent with your thumbnail is definitely hard enough to break teeth! For more information on products and recommendations for dental homecare, visit the Veterinary Oral Health Council's website.

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3. Schedule Regular Dental Check-Ups: Schedule routine (at least once a year, if possible) Comprehensive Oral Health Assessment and Treatment (COHAT) appointments with your veterinarian to monitor your pet's oral health and address any issues early on. Your veterinarian can recommend an appropriate dental care plan based on your pet's individual needs.

By being proactive about your pet's dental care and paying attention to the signs of tooth pain, you can help keep your furry friend happy, healthy, and pain-free. Remember, your pet relies on you to advocate for their well-being, so don't hesitate to seek veterinary care if you suspect they may be experiencing dental discomfort. With proper care and attention, you can ensure that your dog or cat enjoys a lifetime of healthy smiles.

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