

## Medical Notes

InTown Veterinary Group is dedicated to providing clients with an unparalleled range of veterinary care options.

The doctors at Bulger Animal Hospital & Essex County Veterinary Referral Hospital are always on hand no matter how seemingly small the question. We care about you and your pets. No question is too small. If you're worried, call us.

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**Bulger Animal Hospital:**

247 Chickering Road,  
N. Andover, MA 01845

**Phone:**  
(978) 682-9905

**24-Hr Emergency:**  
(978) 725-5544

[www.InTownBulger.com](http://www.InTownBulger.com)

### Pets Have Teeth Too!

Some of the most common diseases, and the most commonly overlooked diseases, of pets are dental in origin. Studies suggest that greater than 90% of dogs over the age of three suffer from dental disease. Results such as these imply veterinarians may not be doing enough to prevent this important problem in our pets.



There are several obvious signs of dental disease in dogs and cats, the most easily observed is "doggie breath." Many pet owners think this is just a nuisance, but it is often an indicator of more serious problems! Other signs, such as pawing at the mouth, chewing gingerly, picking up food and dropping it, and loose teeth suggest discomfort and sometimes impending tooth loss.

Besides the pain and odor, there can be important ramifications for dental disease. Studies have shown links between diseases of the heart, kidneys, and liver in dogs with dental disease. Maintenance of the teeth is important for a pet's overall health and longevity.

This issue of our newsletter is devoted to the teeth: maintenance, diseases, and treatments. We are also excited to announce the addition of more advanced dental services to our dentistry program: root canals and vital pulpectomies, which are discussed later. These are treatments for tooth fracture and in some cases, malocclusions, which can now be done through Bulger Animal Hospital.



To examine your dog or cat's teeth, simply lift the lip, look at the teeth in the back of the mouth as well as those in the front. If you see brown or yellow, crusty material attached to the teeth, smell a foul odor, or see redness along the line where the tooth and gums meet, it's probably time for a dental consultation!

*For more information, feel free to use the medical index on our website. [www.InTownBulger.com](http://www.InTownBulger.com), then click "Medical Index".*

# Medical Notes

## A Dental Brush Up

OK, tell the truth: how many of you floss regularly, get routine dental cleanings, and visit the dentist at least once a year? Kudos to those of you who do! Given your regular routine, imagine what your mouth would look, feel, and smell like if you never brushed between those routine visits? If you aren't brushing your pets' teeth, that's what your dogs and cats are dealing with.

Dental home care is just as important to maintaining health for our pets as it is for us. Below are some easy tips for incorporating dental hygiene into your daily routine.

### Brushing Tips:

- The most important teeth to brush are the back, upper premolars (the biggest teeth you can see in the back of the mouth). Also important are the canine teeth and incisors.
- Brushing the inside of the teeth is not necessary
- A "finger" brush (one which fits over your finger and has short bristles) may make brushing easier, especially in cats.
- Brushing daily is ideal. If this is not possible, at least 2-3 times a week is recommended. Brushing less than that is probably not helpful in preventing dental disease.

### Getting started:

#### What type of brush do I need?

Believe it or not, there are brushes designed especially for dogs and cats. Think about it: the shape of a dog's or cat's jaw is distinctly different from a human's so the shape of the toothbrush should be too. Larger dogs require a longer handled brush with an angled head, while a small brush that fits over the tip of a finger is better suited for small dogs or cats. If you cannot purchase a veterinary toothbrush, you can try a child's soft bristled brush.

#### What is the best toothpaste to use?

Do NOT use your toothpaste on your pet. Human toothpastes have detergents and sudsing agents that are not meant to be swallowed and may upset your pet's stomach. Pet toothpastes come in a variety of flavors including chicken, beef, and malt, as well as mint. Mint may appeal to humans, but our furry friends may like a

### Severe Dental Calculus:

#### Before Cleaning



#### After Cleaning



different flavor. Experiment and find the one that suits your needs best.

### Substitute a flavored toothpaste and brushing for treats

We all love to give Fido or Fluffy a treat as a reward, right? Instead of a cookie, try substituting a short course (1-2 minutes) of toothbrushing with a flavored toothpaste instead. The benefits are two-fold: fewer calories and improved dental health!

### Incorporate brushing into playtime

Most dogs love to have their ears or chin rubbed – it's easy to incorporate gentle brushing into this affectionate process. You only need to brush for a few minutes! The next time you reach out to pet Fido or Fluffy, grab the brush and give him or her a quick scrub. Flavored toothpaste can make this even more enjoyable.

### Coordinate your pet's toothbrushing with the rest of the family

Have family "brushing time" before bed – this is a good way to ingrain healthy dental habits for the whole family: parents, children, and now our four-legged family members as well!

### Things to Consider:



Small dog breeds are more likely to develop periodontal disease than large dog breeds.



Do not risk injury! If your dog doesn't like the idea of you brushing his/her teeth, consider a dental appointment with a veterinarian.



Puppies have 28 teeth. Adult dogs have 42 permanent teeth.

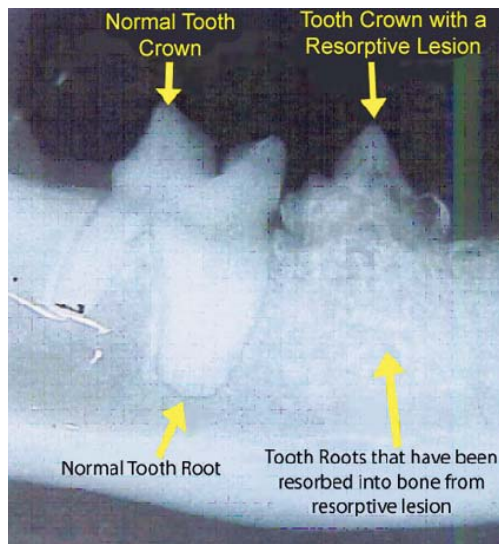
# Cat Corner

## Feline Odontoclastic Resorptive Lesions

Unlike people, cats do not usually get cavities. However, if your cat is over 6 years old, then there is about a 60-75% chance that it has at least one feline odontoclastic resorptive lesion (FORL). The exact cause of resorptive lesions is unknown, but they result from overactivity of odontoclasts, the cells that are responsible for normal tooth remodeling.

In this disease process, the odontoclasts continue to resorb the tooth until sometimes the entire tooth is lost. Usually resorptive lesions affect the premolars and molars and occur at or below the gum line. Initially they appear as small erosions of the tooth along the gumline with associated gum inflammation. They may be covered by calculus (tartar) or gingival tissue. These lesions are progressive, and in the next stage holes develop in the tooth. The holes then progress to complete crown loss, leaving only the root. The only way to diagnose this most advanced stage is with radiographs (x-ray).

The reason that it is so important to be aware of resorptive lesions is that they are excruciatingly painful to cats. The abnormal action of the odontoclasts causes exposure of dentin and the pulp canal, the sensitive structures of the tooth. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to discern whether a cat is painful unless an owner knows what signs to watch for. A cat with a resorptive lesion will often not want to eat dry food anymore because it is too painful to chew. Or the cat's jaw may "chatter" after chewing as a sign of pain. Other general signs to watch for include



drooling weight loss, cranky behavior, lethargy and/or hiding.

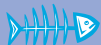
You may actually be able to see the resorptive lesion if your cat will let you examine its teeth. If your cat has more tartar one side of its mouth, this may also be a sign that it is chewing more on one side to avoid the pain on the other side of the mouth. Other less obvious resorptive lesions can be diagnosed by your veterinarian with a dental explorer or probe while the

cat is awake. Still other resorptive lesions cannot be diagnosed until the teeth are cleaned under general anesthesia and the teeth are carefully examined.

The fact that painful resorptive lesions can be hidden under tartar makes it even more important that our pets have regular dental cleanings performed.

During this procedure, the animal's teeth are thoroughly cleaned and examined. If the integrity of any tooth is questioned, dental x-rays are performed. This allows us to determine if there is any bone loss under the gums and the status of the tooth root. Treatment for resorptive lesions almost always involves extraction of the affected tooth. It has been found that if we try to restore the tooth, then resorption only continues underneath the restoration and the animal continues to feel pain. As it can be very difficult to ascertain pain in cats, regular dental examinations are one way that we can ensure our cats are feeling as healthy and happy as possible!

### Things to Consider:



Persistent bad breath is usually an indicator of a dental problem. Talk to your veterinarian if you are concerned.



Do not risk injury! If your cat doesn't like the idea of you brushing his/her teeth, consider a dental appointment with a veterinarian.



The first symptom of a fractured upper canine tooth in a cat may be sneezing.

## Dental Disease in Small Mammals

Dental disease in rabbits, guinea pigs, and sometimes other small mammals is one of the most common problems seen by veterinarians.

Rabbits, guinea pigs, horses and cows are herbivores. Their teeth are very different from those of carnivores and omnivores such as humans, dogs and cats. Herbivore teeth are designed to grind down very abrasive foods, so they grow continuously throughout life. There are two main types of teeth in these pets:

- Incisors (rabbits have 6, guinea pigs have 4)
- Cheek teeth (22 in total)

Dental disease can affect both types of teeth.

Rather than tartar accumulation, gingivitis, and periodontal disease that affect humans, dogs, and cats, small herbivorous mammals get a different type of dental disease. Their teeth overgrow, creating sharp points which have not worn down with the rest of the tooth. These sharp points cause cheek or tongue ulcerations, which often lead to a decrease in appetite.

There are many causes of dental disease in herbivores. The most common is inappropriate diet. Rabbits' and guinea pigs' diet must consist primarily of hay. The long fibers are important for both digestion and evenly grinding teeth down. When rabbits are fed only pellets or pellets and fresh vegetables, there is not enough abrasive material to allow the teeth to wear appropriately. (Please refer to our Summer 2007 newsletter for more on small animal nutrition).

Another common cause of dental disease is genetic predisposition. Selective breeding changes the shape of the skull and can change the way the teeth wear. Other less common causes for dental concern include: trauma, other systemic diseases, and oral infections which may change the way the teeth work.

Diagnosis of dental disease is by history, direct examination of the teeth and sometimes x-ray. Clinical signs associated with dental disease include:

- Decreased or lost appetite.
- Picking up food and then dropping it.
- Drooling.
- Eye or nasal discharge.
- Tooth grinding.

An examination of the incisors can be carried out on an awake animal. However, examining the cheek teeth sometimes requires anesthesia, especially since some lesions may be very subtle. In some cases, bloodwork may reveal a systemic cause of the dental disease.

Treatment will require anesthesia. The teeth are ground down flat, using a combination of rasps and rotary instruments. In most cases your small animal will be awake & eating within an hour or two following the procedure.

In some cases, tooth root abscesses can develop. These may call for the extraction of teeth.

Poor diet is the leading cause of dental disease and other body system problems in small herbivores. The best way to prevent dental disease is to see your veterinarian regularly. Your vet can provide information, troubleshoot your pet's diet and detect early signs of dental disease.

