



Targeting Tartar

The scoop on dental tartar and what you can do about it.

By Sharon Hoffman, DVM
Diplomate American Veterinary Dental College

Key Points

AN ACCUMULATION OF DENTAL TARTAR can be a warning sign of a sore mouth.

DAILY BRUSHING—or daily dental diets or chews—will help remove plaque before it becomes dental tartar.

PETS SHOULD HAVE AN ANNUAL ORAL EXAM, dental X-rays and professional dental cleaning.

For five years, a Miniature Poodle had tartar cleaned from the surfaces of his teeth without anesthesia. He began to have odor from his mouth and pain. He could no longer chew dry dog food—he would drop it from his mouth when he tried.

The dog was referred to a veterinary dentist. Dental X-rays and an oral exam under anesthesia revealed that severe periodontitis was causing the pain and odor.

The dentist had to extract six teeth. The results were dramatic: In a couple of weeks, the poodle was playing with toys and enjoying dry dog food again. As this story illustrates, just removing tartar from your pet's teeth is not enough to keep your pet's mouth healthy and pain-free.

What is the difference between tartar and plaque?

Dental tartar, also called dental calculus, is mineralized plaque biofilm (a community of bacteria that cling together and attach to teeth, gums and areas below the gum). Plaque can be removed with a toothbrush; tartar cannot. Plaque begins to build up on teeth within hours after removal. If dental plaque is not removed daily, minerals from the saliva join the plaque and create tartar in two to four days. Plaque is soft, sticky and difficult to see because it is colorless. Tartar is hard and yellow or brown. Tartar provides a rough surface to which even more plaque biofilm can attach, becoming “scaffolding” for the plaque.

Think of plaque as a very bad gang of bacteria that gets

under the gum and destroys the bone and ligament needed to hold teeth in their sockets. Pockets form around the tooth root due to bone loss. This condition is called periodontal disease (commonly referred to as gum disease). Once it develops, it cannot be cured; it can only be controlled with periodontal treatment and daily maintenance.

What do I need to know about tartar?

The amount of tartar on teeth is NOT an indicator of the severity of periodontal disease. Periodontal disease occurs under the gum, where dental X-rays are needed to diagnose the extent of disease. Pets can have painful periodontal disease without any tartar on the crowns of the teeth. Removal of dental tartar from the crowns won't treat periodontal disease, nor does it prevent tooth loss.

Tartar, by itself, does not affect the health of our pets. In fact, studies have shown that tartar without plaque biofilm does not cause disease. It is the plaque biofilm that causes periodontal disease, pain, odor and tooth loss in pets.

Why should I be concerned about dental tartar?

An accumulation of dental tartar can be a warning sign of a sore mouth. An abundance of tartar could also hide a fracture of the tooth beneath it. If your pet is unwilling to chew, especially on toys or chews that it previously enjoyed, an oral exam and dental X-rays by a veterinarian are needed to find the source of pain.

A buildup of tartar may mean that your pet's food does not effectively remove plaque, which is the first step toward tartar. You may have to change your pet's food to a dental diet.

Tartar can also be an indication that your pet may have crowded teeth, which can predispose to tartar buildup. Tooth crowding can lead to other oral issues.

What is the treatment for dental tartar?

While tartar can be removed from the crowns of teeth, without a thorough periodontal exam this is merely a cosmetic procedure instead of a dental treatment. Clean teeth above the gum may still have severe and painful disease under the gum.

Pets should have an annual oral exam, dental X-rays and professional dental cleaning under anesthesia performed by a trained veterinary professional. This will detect disease that requires periodontal treatment or surgery. Untreated disease under the gum leads to tooth loss, and in some cases, jaw fractures.

Prevention of periodontal disease begins at home with daily dental hygiene. Brush your pet's teeth daily. Your veterinarian may recommend dental chews or a dental diet proven to remove plaque on a daily basis.

While tartar may be unsightly and can be removed by various methods, it is what you can't see below the gum that jeopardizes the pet's oral and general health. ■

Dr. Sharon Hoffman is a Board Certified Veterinary Dental Specialist.



Tartar can be yellow or brown and is hard. Plaque is colorless or white and is soft and sticky. Plaque is visible at the gum margin in this photo.



Periodontal pockets have formed around the tooth roots of these teeth.



Daily brushing removes plaque biofilm.



DO Try This at Home

To help remove plaque and tartar/calculus, choose products approved by the Veterinary Oral Health Council. For an approved list, including some that even “picky non-chewers” will enjoy, visit www.vohc.org. There are dental diets and treats for cats as well.