



Teething troubles

Veterinarian Dr Karen Davies explains why your dog's teeth and gums are a key indicator of overall health.

One of the first things your vet will examine when looking at your dog during a check-up will be the mouth.

There are a number of things that become evident very quickly when you look into a dog's mouth, and it can indicate not only dental disease but also diseases involving other body systems.

Where do we start?

Does the dog have bad breath? This can indicate gut disease, kidney disease and diabetes to name a few.

Is the gum colour normal and does blood return to the gums quickly if the tissue is depressed? Increased redness can be an indication of toxicity or an infection, while pale gums are associated with pain or anaemia, slow return or refill when pressed could indicate poor blood pressure.

Some animal's gums are more pigmented or blackened compared to others, and if you own a Brittany

sometimes they can look almost orange. However, in other breeds this colour may appear with the jaundice associated with liver disease.

That is a long list of possible ailments and we haven't even mentioned the teeth yet!

In most normal animals, the gums will be a bubble-gum pink colour; when pressed, blood should return within two seconds. You should get to know your dog's usual colour when healthy and at rest to ensure you know what their normal is.

Now down to the teeth.

We know that 80 per cent of dogs will have some form of dental disease by the time they are six years old. It may be as simple as some plaque build-up or slightly inflamed gums; others will have fractured crowns.

Periodontal disease is an extension of

gingivitis, an inflammation, or receding of the gums that allows infection to loosen the supporting structures of the teeth.

Just as in people, plaque (the bacterial film), and tartar (the hard build-up) are the usual culprits that start the process.

While dry food does scrape away some plaque, helping to lower the incidence slightly, and raw meaty bones or dental treats also can help, there's no substitute for brushing your dog's teeth.

I recommend starting early with young dogs. If brushing is introduced during early socialisation and training, your dog will accept it with little hassle.

With older dogs it's more of a problem, yet most well-trained gundogs soon accept the brushing. You can use an old face washer over your finger with a little pet flavoured toothpaste, or a silicon/ rubber brush that sits over your finger.

Try to clean both the inside and >>

outside surface of the teeth.

If you have an older dog, start with a trip to your vet and ask for a professional clean under anaesthetic, you can do the maintenance cleaning from there.

A vet can also show you the best way to brush, and discuss different products to use. The frequency of brushing will depend on your commitment, but daily brushing is our recommendation.

Our aim is to ensure your dog does not miss a hunt because of a tooth root abscess, or possibly develop heart disease brought on by infection from gum disease entering the bloodstream.

Odd tastes or odours from plaque build-up and infections can also alter your dog's scenting ability.

Fractured teeth are common in all dogs but more so in hunting breeds.

Breaking off the crown tip of the tooth can cause a few issues, decay can set in, the nerve can be painfully exposed and in the worst case, an infection through to the

root. Extraction or removal of painful teeth is an option but there are also veterinary dental specialists that may be able to repair damaged teeth with fillings and root canals.

Lastly, while the dog's mouth is open, we will look for tumours, which in this area are often particularly nasty.

Although the risk for most tumours increases with age, most vets will advise a biopsy of any mass in the mouth regardless of age.

One of my own dogs developed a bone tumour in the front of the jaw at only 14 months. It was extremely aggressive and terminal within one week from diagnosis, with the only initial sign being a loose front tooth and darkened gum attached to it. Some lumps are benign, triggered by long-standing infections, so it is always best to know what you are dealing with.

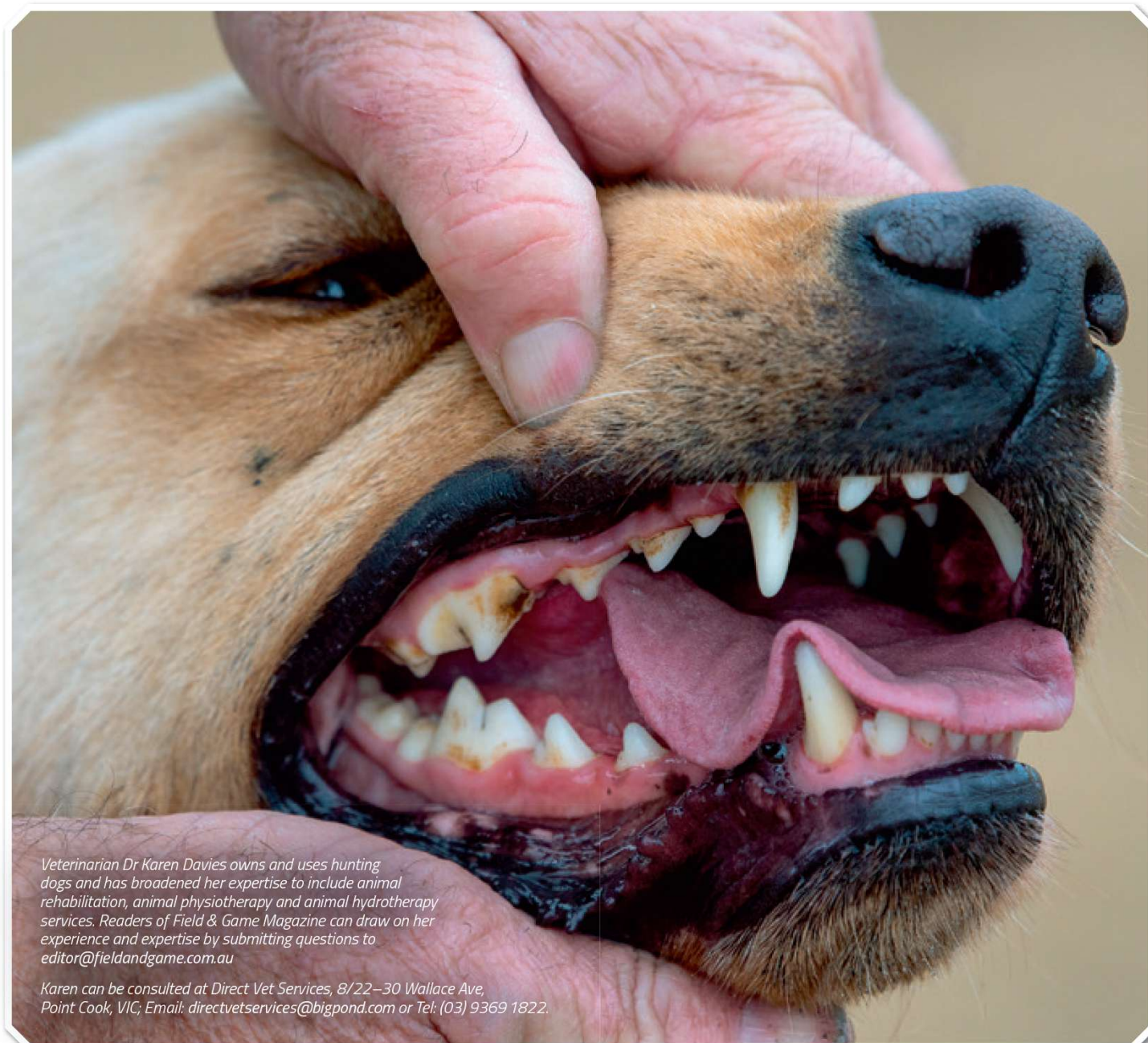
Signs of dental disease could be a loss of appetite, bad breath, pawing at the mouth, excessive or bloody salivation,

chewing on one side more than the other or difficulty in swallowing.

There are scores of preventives in the market but to avoid confusion, my experience is that brushing is best, followed by raw meaty bones. The bones need to have plenty of meat and chewy bits on them not just the hard bone (ribs, brisket, spines, shoulder blades, and pelvis). I find the leg bones are often too hard and can fracture the enamel off the tooth surface, especially on those big back teeth.

Dental chews should contain products that prevent the build-up of bacteria. Oravet chews contain a product called delmopinol, which when fed daily aid in preventing plaque build-up. Delicate Care make a treat and a dry pellet that contains similar products along with Yucca fibre to scrub the teeth.

In my book, an ounce of prevention is better than any cure.



Veterinarian Dr Karen Davies owns and uses hunting dogs and has broadened her expertise to include animal rehabilitation, animal physiotherapy and animal hydrotherapy services. Readers of Field & Game Magazine can draw on her experience and expertise by submitting questions to editor@fieldandgame.com.au

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