

# A Practical Guide to Veterinary Dentistry

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*Dentistry is one of the leading areas that veterinarians would like to expand in their practices. Minimal experience and a lack of preparatory dental classes can cause technicians and veterinarians to feel unprepared or uncomfortable performing oral care procedures. Taking a few steps to make oral care a priority can help make your dental services more profitable and improve the overall wellbeing of your patients.*

## Fundamental Steps to Advancing Dentistry

### Review Dental Equipment and Instruments

Make sure all staff members who will be involved in dental assessments and treatments understand the purpose and correct technique for all tools. This includes everything from basic hand instruments like periodontal probes, explorers, scalers and curettes to power equipment such as ultrasonic scalers, high speed delivery systems, dental X-ray machines (and associated digital systems) and anesthesia monitors. Improper use of these dental tools can leave plaque and tartar below the gum line and cause serious oral health issues which could have been avoided.

### Discuss Common Oral Health Issues

Knowing what to look for is critical in diagnosing oral health problems. Review these and other oral health issues with your staff:

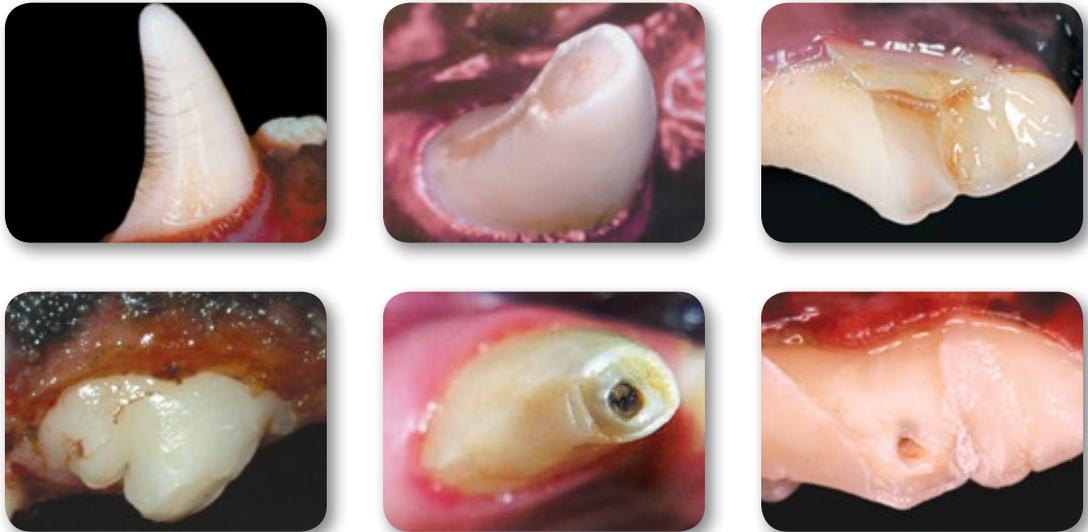
- **Periodontal Disease**

This very common infection damages the tissue and bones that support dogs' and cats' teeth. It starts as a immune reaction to plaque (called gingivitis) but then will typically progress to major inflammation (called periodontitis), pain and bone loss. If left untreated, periodontal disease may also affect vital organs, including the heart, kidneys, liver and brain. Dogs and cats suffering from periodontal disease **may** exhibit plaque and calculus buildup, gingival recession, mobile teeth, excessive salivation, chewing difficulties and halitosis. However, note that these symptoms are a late sign of disease.



### • **Tooth Fractures**

Pets often break teeth by chewing on objects like hard toys, nylon bones, antlers, cow and horse hooves, and chain-link fences. Tooth fractures can be complicated, with pulp exposed, or uncomplicated, without pulp exposure. Fractures are painful and those with direct pulp exposure will become infected. Both types of fractures should be treated immediately.



### • **Tooth Resorption**

Cats are especially susceptible to lesions that erode their teeth over time. Tooth resorption frequently begins below the gum line and extends into the oral cavity. These lesions are excruciatingly painful, but most pets show no physical signs; therefore, this issue often goes unnoticed without an exam under anesthesia combined with dental X-rays.



Recommended treatments for these and other dental issues can be found at [OralATP.com](https://www.oralatp.com).



## Demonstrate Proper Dental Scaling Procedures

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Regular dental scaling is a very important part of keeping your patients' mouths healthy, but many technicians are not aware of the most effective way to perform a dental scaling.

- **Supragingival Scaling**

Supragingival scaling is generally done with an ultrasonic scaler. Use the side of the instrument one to two millimeters from the tip for maximum vibration. You should contact the tooth on every millimeter of tooth surface, using slow overlapping strokes in different directions until the tooth feels smooth. The typical recommendation is that the tip of the scaler can stay on a tooth for about 12–15 seconds before the tooth needs a break to avoid overheating. After finishing with the ultrasonic scaler, it's a good idea to go back over the tooth with a hand scaler to ensure complete calculus removal. Start with the scaler at the gum line to engage the calculus and pull away in short controlled strokes.

- **Subgingival Scaling**

The most important step in dental prophylaxis is removing plaque and calculus below the gum line. If subgingival scaling is not adequately performed, cleaning the surface of the teeth provides no medical benefit. This can be initiated with a proper subgingival tip on an ultrasonic scaler, but the majority of subgingival scaling is done with a curette. Proper use of the curette starts with the shank (terminal end) of the curette parallel to the tooth. To get it underneath the gum, rotate the curette so the face is flat against the tooth (to decrease the profile) and insert it gently to the bottom of the pocket. Rotate the curette until the shank is parallel to the tooth to engage the calculus and pull gently away from the gum line. Repeat with numerous overlapping strokes until the tooth feels smooth.

For a full demonstration and additional scaling tips, check out my latest CE-accredited webinar—Dental Scaling Procedure Must-Knows—at [OralATP.com](https://www.oralatp.com).



## Educate Clients About the Importance of Oral Care

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One of the most difficult parts of developing a dental practice is convincing clients that pets need professional oral care to stay healthy. Many pet owners are not aware of the importance of professional dental cleanings. Plus, dental services can be a considerable expense that clients are not expecting. Start discussing oral care during all new client visits so pet owners are prepared when it's time for the pet's first cleaning. Remember to evaluate patients' oral health at every wellness exam and always emphasize the need for preventive home care. Complimentary client education materials are available at [vetresources.greenies.com](http://vetresources.greenies.com).

Dental services do more than provide health benefits for your patients. They can be a steady source of revenue for your clinic. Unlike products, veterinary services cannot be taken away or provided by an online source. Building your services is one of the best ways to position your clinic for the future.

To learn more about oral health issues, treatments or proper dental scaling techniques, visit [OralATP.com](http://OralATP.com)—the most comprehensive online veterinary dentistry resource available. In addition to detailing dentistry protocols, this in-depth site offers CE-accredited dental webinars and real veterinary case studies of oral health issues.



Dr. Niemiec, one of the country's few Board Certified Veterinary Dental Specialists, is recognized internationally as a leading authority in veterinary dentistry. He is the immediate past president of the Academy of Veterinary Dentistry. In addition, he serves on the credentials committee for the American College of Veterinary Dentistry and is the representative to the World Small Animal Veterinary Association for the Academy of Veterinary Dentistry. Dr. Niemiec has published numerous articles in well-respected journals at the local, state, national and international levels and is the author of the recently published book *Veterinary Periodontology*.