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By far, the most common dental diseases of ferrets are periodontal disease, fractured canine teeth, and oral resorptive lesions (cavities). Other conditions include dental malformations and cancers involving the gums and jaws, but these tend to be uncommon.

### Periodontal Disease

Ferrets have 40 adult teeth on which plaque can collect and calcify to form tartar if it's not removed. Dental disease actually starts with gingivitis, an inflammation of the gum margins. This inflammation is caused by bacteria that live in the mouth and invade the pockets surrounding the teeth. A thin red line along the margins of the gum and teeth tells you that your ferret has gingivitis. Brushing the teeth will remove the bacteria both mechanically, and, if an antibacterial toothpaste is used, by killing them. Oral antibacterial rinses can have the same effect and are easier to use in ferrets.

Untreated gingivitis can progress to periodontitis; the disease involving the teeth and gum pockets. Plaque is substance made of bacteria, sugars, and bacterial by-products



which coats the teeth and changes the oral environment to make it a better medium for bacterial growth. Calculus or tartar is mineralized plaque that accumulates on the teeth themselves. Ferrets can accumulate significant tartar, particularly on their molar teeth.

As the mouth becomes a bacterial playground, nastier bacteria with more pathogenic potential move in. The infection and inflammation accompanying them can eventually destroy the attachment between the teeth and surrounding soft tissue. Pockets can form around the teeth where more bacteria breed. Eventually these oral bacteria also invade the bloodstream and can cause infections in the kidneys and even the heart valves.

**Periodontal disease is far more easily prevented than treated.** Ideally owners should brush their ferret's teeth at home before any signs of dental disease are present. Daily brushing of the teeth will help to remove plaque, as well as keep the gingiva healthy. Ferret teeth may be brushed with a small soft rubber "toothbrush" which fits over the finger. These are available through veterinarian's offices as well as some pet stores. While ferrets are generally not pleased with the process, they rarely resist aggressively. There are a number of toothpastes available for animals, and poultry flavors are usually the best tolerated.

If tartar has already accumulated, careful inspection of the teeth should be done to ascertain whether gingivitis is present. If no gingivitis is present, experienced owners may

elect to scrape the tartar from the tooth; care to avoid damage to the gums is paramount. However, if the gums are inflamed and reddened, the ferret should be seen by a veterinarian or veterinary dentist for a complete cleaning (also known as a **dental prophylaxis**), scaling (removal of subgingival tartar), and polishing. Ferrets must be anesthetized for teeth cleaning. Most cleanings take only about 20 to 30 minutes, even for ferrets with heavy tartar.



Diet has a large part in preventing tartar formation. Ferrets which are on a soft bland diet are at high risk for development of periodontal disease. For this reason, the feeding of dry kibble has long been advocated for ferrets. The feeding of animal bones, which has been previously recommended to decrease the buildup of tartar is probably not a good idea, as it may contribute to slab fractures of molars.

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## Fractured Teeth

Another common problem in the ferret mouth is that of fractured teeth. Bored ferrets may often chew on the wire of their cages, or the tooth can break from a fight or other trauma. Canine teeth, especially those of the upper jaw, are most likely to break off in this situation. At times only the enamel is chipped which should be treated by allowing the veterinarian to sedate the ferret and grind down any rough edges. Luckily for these ferrets, the tooth pulp does not extend as far down into the tooth as it does in other species. This means that pulp exposure and a requirement for extraction or endodontic therapy is less likely in fractured canine teeth. Additionally, the pulp cavity of the ferret canine tooth narrows and shortens with age. Canine teeth that are fractured close to the gumline, or those that are discolored or actively bleeding need to be quickly assessed by a veterinarian or veterinarian dentist. Less obvious fractures which required treatment are post which results in salivation, difficulty eating, or obvious signs of pain while eating. In addition to the apin of such injuries, endodontic therapy (root canal) is most successful when performed soon after the injury has occurred.

## Oral Resorptive Lesions (Cavities)

Like cats, ferrets often acquire oral resorptive lesions (cavities) under the gum tissue. Since the cavities are under the gums, you can't see the holes in the teeth. These lesions form where the enamel and cementum meet.

This may be caused by gingivitis, which starts resorption (dissolving and assimilation) of the calcified portions of the tooth. Frequently, there is a noticeable amount of gingival tissue surrounding the affected areas. Sometimes only one root of a multi-rooted tooth is involved, weakening the entire tooth. Resorptive lesions lead to cavitations that undermine the crown of the tooth. If the crown fractures, there may be retained roots left in the gum tissue.

Resorptive lesions are severe and extremely painful. Dental radiographs can assess the extent of the lesion and show if repair is possible. Extraction is often a better option.

### **For more information, contact:**

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# Ferret Dentistry

