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### Teeth and Gums

Westies have twenty-eight deciduous (baby) teeth and forty-two permanent (adult) teeth. It is our responsibility as guardians to provide the care needed to ensure the dog a healthy oral cavity and good dental health. Evidence has shown that routine dental care can extend the lifespan of a dog by two to six years. Chronic oral infection can spread bacteria to other parts of the body, including the lungs, heart, liver and kidneys. Fortunately, most dental disease is preventable through a program of oral hygiene and regular professional care. Dental care should be a part of every Westie's preventive medical program. Healthy Westie gums are firm and pink. The gums are close to the teeth with no space for debris to collect.

#### PERIODONTAL DISEASE

Periodontal disease is the most common cause of oral infection and tooth loss in dogs. Periodontal disease occurs in two forms: gingivitis and periodontitis. Senior dogs, those seven years or older, are especially susceptible to periodontal disease.

#### GINGIVITIS

Gingivitis is a reversible inflammatory response of the marginal gumline and the earliest phase of periodontal disease. If your Westie has gingivitis, its gums appear reddened, swollen, may bleed after the application of light pressure and can be painful. Halitosis is commonly present with gingivitis. The teeth can become loose from the gums and form pockets that can trap food and bacteria. Closely associated with gingivitis and tooth decay is the accumulation of plaque and dental calculus or tarter (creamy-brown, hard material on the teeth). An estimated 80% of dogs three years of age or older have gingivitis. Usually your veterinarian detects this condition during a routine wellness examination. It has been suggested that dogs accumulate plaque five times faster than humans. One milligram of dental plaque contains over one trillion bacteria.

#### PERIODONTITIS

Periodontitis is an advanced form of periodontal disease involving deeper inflammation with loss of tooth support and can cause permanent damage. Symptoms may include chronic bad breath; red, swollen and bleeding gums; visible plaque formation; loss of appetite and energy; panting and excessive salivation. Senior dogs, those seven years or older, are especially susceptible to periodontal disease. The diagnosis of periodontitis is based on a thorough oral and periodontal examination and dental radiography.

#### HOME DENTAL CARE

Starting a home dental hygiene program for your Westie is easy. Begin by selecting a very soft-bristled toothbrush and toothpaste designed specifically for dogs. Do not use human toothpaste as it contains ingredients that may cause stomach upset and foaming of the mouth. You may use a soft cloth, finger brush or a piece of gauze wrapped around your index finger.

##### Step 1

Begin gradually. Although it's easier to get a Westie used to teeth cleaning in puppyhood, it's never too late to start. Let your Westie lick the "special enzymatic toothpaste" from your index finger. C.E.T. brand of doggy toothpaste is flavored and dogs generally like the taste. This should be a fun and yummy experience for your dog. Use an excited voice and praise your Westie for tasting.

##### Step 2

Rub the incisors with your index finger coated with dentifrice. Each day, massage more of the teeth and gums. Don't forget to get your Westie excited about dental care. Praise and pet your Westie often during and after each session.

##### Step 3

Once your Westie will allow your finger in his mouth, you can try the fingerbrush (available in kits from your veterinarian or pet supply store), a small soft cloth or moistened gauze wrapped around your finger. Do not go beyond

your Westie's point of comfort. Build up to thirty seconds of brushing per side. The dog's mouth may remain closed. The accumulation of plaque is mainly on the outside of the teeth.

#### **Step 4**

You can now graduate to the specially designed doggy toothbrush or soft, child-sized toothbrush. Angle the brush at a forty-five degree angle; use slow circular strokes and gently brush the teeth and adjoining gumline. Some Westie owners successfully use electric toothbrushes.

Choose the same time each day (perhaps in the evening when you brush your teeth). Brushing should become a part of your Westie's daily habit. You should be relaxed and positive. Do not hold your breath. Be firm, patient and persistent. Soon, your Westie may come running when it's time for the "daily dental treat!" On days you cannot brush your Westie's teeth, use an antiplaque oral rinse (such as Hexarinse).

If your Westie gets gum disease or cavities, consult your veterinarian. Treatment may involve extraction of teeth and antibiotic therapy. Almost any dental treatment or procedure performed on humans can be done for dogs. Root canals and caps can restore broken or decayed teeth. Braces can correct misalignments and bridgework can replace teeth lost from decay or gum disease.

Modify your Westie's behavior to avoid chewing hard objects such as rocks and sticks and eliminate repetitive trauma if possible.

Visit your veterinarian annually for a complete oral examination and dental prophylaxis (teeth cleaning). Provide hard food as it leaves less substrate on the teeth than soft food and helps to clean teeth mechanically. Hill's Rawhide chews help to clean the teeth; however, great care should be exercised when using rawhide products. Westies can choke on large pieces of rawhide and they can become lodged in the throat causing choking. Large pieces can also become lodged in the digestive track that can cause illness or, in extreme cases, surgery or even death.

Note: If your Westie reacts with hostility to your attempts to clean his teeth, don't risk a bite. Consult your veterinarian.

**\*\*\*Disclaimer\*\*\***

Any information contained on this site relating to various medical, health, and fitness conditions of Westies and their treatment is for informational purposes only and is not meant to be a substitute for the advice provided by your own veterinarian. You should not use the information contained herein for diagnosing a Westie's health - you should always consult your own veterinarian.

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