Dental problems are the single most common condition we deal with as veterinarians. The vast majority of these problems occur during adulthood and into old age. Bad breath, discolored teeth, deposits on the surfaces of the teeth, or red and irritated gums are all signs of dental problems. All these conditions have a common factor - Bacteria.

Bacteria play a major role in the formation of plaque and tartar. Bacteria live on remnants of food in the mouth. When bacteria combine with saliva and food debris in the channel between the tooth and gum, plaque forms and accumulates on the tooth. When bacteria continue to grow in the plaque, and as calcium salts are deposited, the plaque hardens to become a limestone-like material called tartar.

In time, the bacteria work their way between the gums and teeth, causing the gum and the deep, bony structures of the jaw to separate from the teeth. Now we have what is termed periodontal disease. Without treatment, pockets of bacteria build up below the gums forming abscesses. These pockets of pus may appear along the gumline and further separate the tooth from the gum, which allows more food and bacteria to accumulate, and the process continues.

Periodontal disease is severe and is irreversible. It may require advanced therapy and thorough plaque control to prevent progression of the disease. Periodontal disease causes red, swollen, tender gums, receding gums, bleeding gums, oral pain and dysfunction, and bad breath.

Regrettably, the problem does not limit itself to the dog's mouth. Irritated and weakened gums allow bacteria to cross into the bloodstream and be carried through the body, potentially infecting internal organs such as the heart, liver, and kidneys. Oral disease may also affect your pet’s behavior and sociability with others.

The good news is that oral disease is primarily preventable. The American Veterinary Dental Society recommends a complete dental care program to help prevent oral disease. This includes good professional dental care, and proper home care and nutrition. Research shows that many dental problems in dogs can be controlled by such programs. Your pet is never too old to begin a pet dental care routine.