Cavities, Dental Caries, and Decay in Dogs

What are Cavities?

Cavities, also known as dental caries or decay, are caused by oral bacteria that live on the tooth in the form of plaque and calculus. These bacteria cause progressive demineralization and destruction of the hard structures of the teeth (the enamel, dentin, and cementum) weakening the tooth, potentially leading to pulp death. This can be painful, especially if the dentin and pulp of the tooth are involved. As cavities progress, there may be a noticeable hole in the tooth that often looks dark brown or black in color.

What is very interesting is that dental cavities in dogs are very rare – affecting only about 5% of the adult canine population. There are many theories as to why dogs have a much lower rate of decay than people, including diet, salivary pH and other theories. When they do occur, they tend to involve the molar teeth of the upper and lower jaw- the teeth that are hard to visualize on an awake examination.


This cavity on the inside of the upper canine tooth was not visible until the patient was under anesthesia.

How do you treat a cavity?

Just as in people, when a cavity is detected before it has caused major destruction of the tooth it can be treated by removing the decay and placing a filling made of composite restoration material. This is a specialized procedure that requires detailed knowledge of anatomy and tooth morphology, as well as specialized materials used to repair the tooth.

Sometimes, the cavity may cause the tooth to die, resulting in endodontic disease (for more information, see our website handout on *Endodontic Disease*). In these cases, a filling will only temporarily repair the cosmetic aspect of the disease. In order to try to save the tooth, Endodontic therapy (a root canal) would also be required.

When there is advanced decay, endodontic disease is present, or if it is a non-strategic tooth, we may recommend extracting the tooth rather than performing root canal therapy and filling.
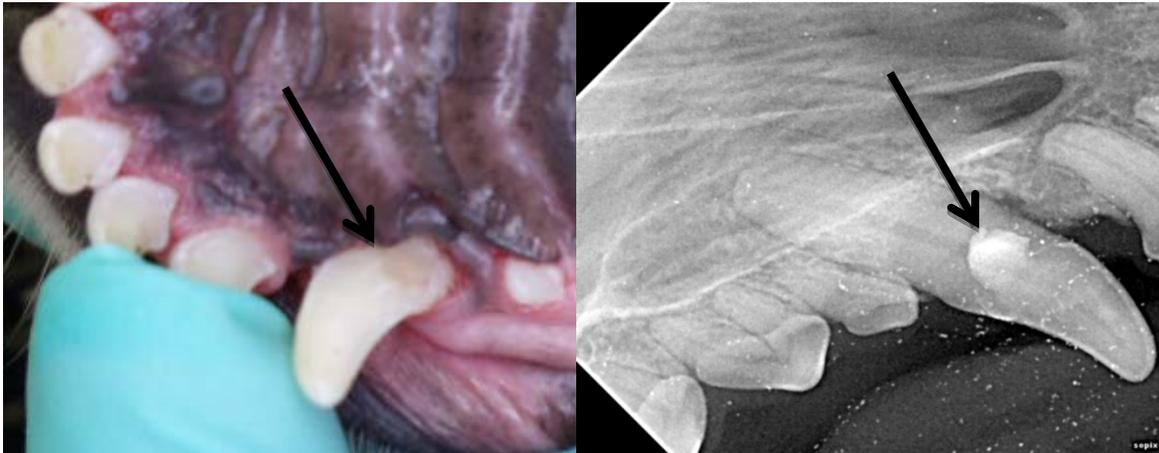
The same patient pictured from above with the cavity restored with a filling after the teeth have been cleaned.

How can you prevent cavities?

Since cavities are caused by oral bacteria, the best way to prevent them is to remove the oral bacteria that live on the surface of the tooth on a daily basis- This means brushing the teeth at least once a day. We can also use oral rinses, and there are also toys and chews designed to help prevent plaque accumulation. For a list of these tools, please visit www.VOHC.org.