

VETERINARY MEDICINE TODAY

Dental Care for Pets - Part I

For many years, veterinarians have known that maintaining proper oral health in our pets is absolutely critical in sustaining their health, quality of life, and longevity. Even as important as this topic has been through the years, public awareness regarding proper dental care for pets has recently reached a new level. Today, it is very common for owners to want to discuss their pet's oral home care and request information on professional care at routine wellness visits. As a result, we are now seeing our pets live much longer lives than in the past.

For most of us, caring for our teeth and gums has been part of our daily routine for as long as we can remember. Just as important as this daily care is for us, it is also equally as important for our pets. This means establishing a regular schedule of brushing our pet's teeth on a daily basis. Some owners will even brush their pet's teeth twice a day. Yes, it really can be done, especially once you get the pet accustomed to the routine. In addition to brushing, there are also special dental chews and foods designed to help control the buildup of plaque and control tartar. To make the introduction of this very important procedure to your pet easier, I have included a few tips on how to get your pet used to the tooth brush.

First, realize that it may take several days to weeks for your pet to feel comfortable with it, but with patience and persistence, most pets will easily accept it. Make the initial sessions gentle, brief and positive. At the beginning, allow your pet to get used to having your finger rub inside the lips, then on the gums and teeth. You can dip your finger into beef bouillon for your dog or tuna water for cats. Once your pet is used to your finger massaging the gums and teeth, wrap gauze around your finger and use the same beef or tuna flavor and gradually introduce it into your pet's mouth until you are able to rub the gums and teeth with circular motions. Before starting to use a soft-bristle tooth brush or a finger brush, place a small amount of pet

tooth paste on your finger and allow your pet to taste it. Do not use human tooth paste, as it contains ingredients that can create an upset stomach if swallowed. Once the pet is used to the taste of the tooth paste, place some tooth paste on the bristles and allow the pet to lick it. At this point, you should be ready to introduce gentle brushing of the teeth with the bristles at a 45 degree angle away from the gum line. If the pet is experiencing pain or bleeding, stop and have your pet examined. Your veterinarian may need to start with antibiotics, a special oral rinse, and then schedule a dental cleaning before you can resume brushing, in order to prevent pain and a negative dental experience.

Most importantly, do not hesitate to seek the advice of your veterinarian regarding your pet's oral care, as we are here to help you help your pet live a long and healthy life.

William T. Carlisle, DVM

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Dental Care for Pets - Part II

In Part I, I discussed some techniques to get your pet familiar with the at-home care of their teeth. Once your pet becomes comfortable with your daily dental brushing, you will be well on your way to maintaining their excellent oral health. By helping your pet achieve this, you are also taking a very important step forward in preventing the onset of some very serious dental related diseases. These can result in abscesses and even loss of their teeth and progress to the point of causing impairment of the function of the heart, lungs, kidneys and other major organs.

It is important that you take a moment and carefully lift your pet's lips and examine your pets' gums and teeth. Be careful when attempting this the first few times, since your pet may not be comfortable with having this done, or may already have an infected, sensitive mouth. A healthy mouth will have the same general characteristics as with us: clean, white teeth; an acceptable odor; coral pink colored gum tissue; and firm gum tissue which evenly and tightly encircles each tooth. Without daily brushing or other oral care, food debris and bacteria start to build up on the teeth, especially at or under the gum line. This is commonly referred to as plaque, which is a colorless film that contains large amounts of bacteria. Plaque is truly the root of most dental problems in our pets. As plaque begins to build up on the teeth, it mineralizes and hardens into a substance called tartar. Tartar is the brownish colored material that is deposited at the base of the teeth and is generally difficult to remove without a professional cleaning. This build up causes inflammation or redness of the gums, resulting in a condition known as gingivitis. As the inflammation progresses further, the destruction of the gum tissue and periodontal tissue ensues, causing recession of the gums, loosening of the teeth and eventual tooth loss. This final process is known as periodontitis or periodontal disease, which I will discuss in greater detail in next month's article.

To summarize, to maintain good oral health with your pet, you will need to pay close attention to the teeth and gums by implementing daily home care, removing the plaque before it hardens to form tartar, making sure that your veterinarian thoroughly inspects your pet's mouth at the time of its routine physical, and scheduling regular dental cleanings as recommended

by your veterinarian. This is a cooperative effort with you, your pet and your veterinarian.

To get more information about veterinarian recommended products for oral care, you can visit the Veterinary Oral Health Council's website at www.vohc.org.

W. T. Carlisle, DVM

VETERINARY MEDICINE TODAY

Dental Care for Pets – Part III

In Part I and II of this series, I discussed basic dental care, some techniques that may be helpful in starting oral hygiene for our pets at home, and characteristics of healthy and unhealthy mouths in our pets.

This month, my goal is to increase your awareness and vigilance of the early warning signs of dental problems. This is extremely important, because by three years of age, over half of all cats and dogs already show some sign of dental disease. Although there are many contributing factors for this including genetics, nutrition and stress; the three major factors associated with the onset of dental disease are: 1) Poor oral care – by not brushing our pets' teeth on a daily basis - removing plaque before it hardens to tartar – which eventually leads to periodontal disease, resulting with tooth loss. 2) Breed – not only are individual pets of various breeds affected by the genetics of their own family line, it has also been shown that certain types of breeds of cats and dogs are generally more susceptible to periodontal disease. For example, overcrowded mouths especially with smaller breeds, pets with misaligned teeth common with most short-faces breeds, and certain cat breeds have an increased incidence of problems. 3) Age – periodontal disease, broken or worn teeth, enamel staining, and root canal problems increase as the pet ages.

Signs of periodontal disease are: bad breath, red, inflamed gum tissue, bleeding gums, accumulation of yellow-brown tartar, softening or loosening of the gum tissue encircling the teeth, subdued behavior, change in eating or chewing habits, pawing at the mouth, abnormal drooling, pain when eating, dropping food out of the mouth, swallowing food whole, and missing teeth. Although periodontal disease is a slow, gradual process, it is also an insidious one that unless detected in the early stage of gingivitis, will quickly progress past the reversible early stages and into the more advanced, irreversible stage of profound bone loss and ligament support of the teeth, followed with eventual tooth loss. Infections associated with periodontal disease can also shower the pets' blood stream with bacteria, leading to serious damage of the major organs such as the heart, liver, and kidneys. It should now be very apparent why it is necessary to maintain our pets' oral health with daily brushing of their teeth and closely inspecting their mouths

for the early warning signs of disease. If caught early and treatment is started before the problem becomes irreversible - with the proper dental care by the veterinarian and conscientious home care - dental disease can be controlled and possibly reversed before the pet ever experiences advanced periodontitis or the separation of the gum tissue from the tooth. Next month, I will tie the articles together with an easy 3 step program on how to improve or maintain our pets' oral health.

William T. Carlisle, DVM

VETERINARY MEDICINE TODAY

Dental Care for Pets – Part IV

After learning some basic dental care for our pets, characteristics of a healthy mouth, and the early warning signs of dental disease, we should now be ready to take a more active role in maintaining our pets' good oral health by following these three steps:

STEP 1 – Start by scheduling a complete physical examination with your veterinarian, including a thorough evaluation of the oral cavity. This is usually done at the time of the routine wellness / vaccination visit, but should also be scheduled any time you notice anything unusual, so that early intervention can prevent a more serious problem. After the initial assessment and depending on the patient's state of health and age, other tests may be indicated, including blood profiles, urinalysis, ECG, and radiographs, before any treatment program is started. These tests are to ensure the safety of any necessary anesthetic procedures for the patient. If evidence of dental disease is found at the time of the examination, and the patient is in good general health, a treatment plan can be initiated. This may involve just a simple sedation and dental prophylaxis, or could involve general anesthesia with extensive reconstructive dental surgery, intravenous fluids, antibiotics, pain medications and hospitalization.

STEP 2 – Make oral care for your pets a part of your daily routine. Once this is started, it becomes easier to do, pets become more comfortable with it, and the rewards far outweigh the minimal inconvenience of spending a few minutes every day working with the pets' mouths. In addition to the daily brushing of their teeth with a special tooth paste, there are many products available that are helpful in reducing the accumulation of plaque on the teeth, including specialized tartar control diets, lactoperoxidase enzyme impregnated rawhide chews, and oral rinses.

STEP 3 – Continue to monitor the progress of your pet's oral health with regular dental checkups; and in addition, with any specific oral examinations and/or cleanings that the veterinarian would advise. Some pets, especially as they get older, are much more prone to develop dental disease because of

changes in the composition of the saliva that more readily allows the accumulation of plaque and tartar on the teeth. This build-up can have a profound negative effect on the overall health of aging pets if not attended to. Closely follow your veterinarian's advice, because these pets will require more home and professional care than the average pet. Pets are never too old for anesthesia if proper precautions are taken. Veterinary anesthesia and surgery is extremely safe for our pets today, due to great improvements in the medications administered as well as state of the art anesthetic monitoring equipment in most clinics today.

Next month, I'll discuss some new products available to veterinarians for the prevention of dental disease with pets. And, I'll share with you the products and techniques that I routinely use on my own pets. I know that my pets have all lived longer than average life spans due in part to keeping their teeth and gums in excellent condition. Yours can too.

William T. Carlisle, DVM

VETERINARY MEDICINE TODAY

Dental care for Pets – Part V

Once we start the habit of brushing our pets' teeth on a daily basis, we soon realize that maintaining our pets' good oral health is not that difficult. The younger the pet is at the time of introducing oral home care, the easier it is to get a routine established. If you are having trouble working with an older pet's mouth, notice bleeding of the gums or detect a painful response to your brushing, schedule a thorough evaluation of your pet with your veterinarian. Early intervention followed with a treatment and home care plan can help prevent other more serious problems.

New dental care products available today are primarily designed to prevent problems, because once trouble begins, it takes a lot of effort to fight and control the disease. These include Chlorhexidine-based products; dental diets, treats, wipes and special tooth pastes; stannous fluoride products; and a sealant, OraVet, produced by the Merial Pharmaceutical Company, which is an effective plaque prevention gel. It is more often recommended when brushing the teeth isn't a viable option. The Pfizer Veterinary Pharmaceutical division has a new vaccine available to aid in the prevention of canine periodontitis. We are currently considering the addition of this vaccine to our canine wellness program, but are awaiting further safety and efficacy studies.

My personal approach that I recommend and follow with my own pets is as follows... I primarily use a dry kibbled maintenance diet, and mix in approximately 25% of Hill's t/d, a prescription diet that specifically reduces plaque and controls tartar, unless the medical / nutritional needs of the pet dictates the use of a different prescription diet. I only allow my pets to chew on rubber Kong-type chew toys, not bones, pig ears, cow hooves, nor anything

harder than rawhide chews, and then I only use CET rawhide chew strips that are specially treated with a lactoperoxidase enzyme that helps keep the gums healthy. I find that this helps to prevent broken teeth or damaged gum tissue due to chewing on brittle or hard objects. Because the diets and chew strips do not eliminate the need to brush the teeth, in the morning after feeding, I use Maxi-Guard Oral Cleansing Gel with a soft tooth brush; and at night, I brush their teeth using a finger brush with the CET brand pet toothpaste, also formulated with a lactoperoxidase enzyme. I find that it takes less than three minutes twice a day to work on each pet, time that we all could schedule caring for our pets. I also have their teeth cleaned and polished at least once a year. Over the years, my own pets have greatly benefited from this approach. I attribute the fact that they have all lived longer than average life spans for their breeds in part to maintaining their excellent oral health.

To summarize, to maintain good oral health with your pet, you will need to pay close attention to the teeth and gums by implementing daily home care, removing the plaque before it hardens to form tartar, making sure that your veterinarian thoroughly inspects your pet's mouth at the time of its routine physical, and scheduling regular dental cleanings or other care as recommended by your veterinarian. This is a cooperative effort with you, your pet and your veterinarian.

To get more information about veterinarian recommended products for oral care, you can visit the Veterinary Oral Health Council's website at www.vohc.org.

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