

## **PETS HAVE TEETH TOO!**

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Imagine how your teeth would look and feel if you didn't brush everyday. Imagine what they would be like if you never brushed them. Your pet's teeth are the same as yours and need regular dental care.

The most common disease in pet animals is periodontal (gum) disease. It affects at least 90% of dogs over the age of 5 years. Periodontal disease is the result of bacterial infection of the gums and the supporting tissues of the teeth. Eventually teeth fall out. Bacteria is carried throughout the body by a large network of blood vessels near gums and teeth.

Periodontal disease can lead to heart, liver and kidney disease. With the immune system constantly challenged by bacteria from the mouth, it is less able to respond to other infections. Mouths with periodontal disease are painful so animals do not chew their food as well and do not digest it properly. The overall effect is that the quality and quantity of life suffer dramatically.

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT DENTAL DISEASE**

#### **HAVE A LOOK**

The first step is to look in your pet's mouth. If the gums are red or inflamed, if there is a foul odour, if there is pus at the gum line, or if you see loose or broken teeth, arrange to have your veterinarian do an oral examination as soon as possible. The problem will be assessed and a treatment plan formulated. This will usually involve a professional cleaning and polishing of the teeth and may include extraction of teeth that cannot be saved. Once the teeth are clean you can start home-care to prevent further plaque and tartar accumulation.

Without good home-care, many pets would need a general anesthetic and professional cleaning every six months to one year, whereas with good home care this interval can be doubled or tripled or more.

#### **BRUSHING TEETH**

Brushing your pet's teeth is the main component of home-care. The goal is to remove plaque before it becomes tartar. Plaque is an invisible film of bacteria, saliva and food particles which adheres to the teeth. Left undisturbed, plaque collects minerals from the saliva to form the rock-like brown deposits known as tartar or calculus. By brushing daily, you remove plaque and so tartar builds up slower. Brushing will not remove tartar that has already developed.

#### **GUIDELINES FOR BRUSHING TEETH**

1. The first step is to get your pet used to having its mouth handled. This may take some time and patience on your part. Try to make it fun! Use a lot of love and praise to gain your pet's confidence. If he fusses, play with him, try again and praise him when you are successful. Go slowly. It is important that home-care not become a negative experience.
2. Once your pet allows you to handle the muzzle, gently rub your finger along their teeth and gums. Some cheese or peanut butter on your finger will make this a pleasant experience.
3. When your pet is used to this, start using a washcloth or gauze pad on your finger to rub along the teeth and gums.
4. Finally, use a soft toothbrush to brush the teeth. There are several veterinary brushes available and many pediatric human brushes are well suited to animal use as well. A circular motion is most effective but a back and forth motion may be easier to perform. Don't worry about the inside surfaces of the teeth. The animal's tongue keeps these surfaced clean.
5. There is a growing selection of veterinary tooth washes, pastes and gels. Your veterinarian can help you select the one best suited to your situation. These products all increase the effectiveness of your home-care program. Human toothpaste should be avoided as it will foam and distress your pet and can cause stomach upset if swallowed. Baking soda can be dangerous because of its high sodium content. Hydrogen peroxide is too harsh for the gums and must not be swallowed.

If there is no way you can brush or clean your pet's teeth, the next best home-care treatment is an oral spray (or gel) that is an antiplaque agent. This will reduce the bacteria level along the gums and thus reduce the amount of plaque and tartar. If you are not able to do anything, you should have your pet's teeth professionally cleaned and polished every 6 to 12 months as needed. It will be needed if either visible tartar or redness of the gums develops.

## DIET

Diet can be a factor in the development of periodontal disease. Soft or sticky foods can cling to the surface of teeth and promote plaque formation. Feeding dry food will help reduce the amount of plaque and tartar but it will by no means eliminate it. Raw vegetables, rawhides, and other chew things that have a massaging action on the gums will be helpful in controlling plaque.

Do not feed real bones or cow hooves. These are so hard that they can break teeth.

## THE 3 STEPS OF PREVENTATIVE DENTAL CARE FOR PETS

1. Annual Veterinary Dental Check-ups...

Routine check-ups maintain your pet's oral health as well as overall health. They are the

best method of preventing minor dental problems from becoming serious. If tartar or redness of the gums is present, a professional dental cleaning will be required.

2. Regular Brushing...

A home-care program consisting of brushing, preferably every day, will slow the accumulation of plaque and tartar and help keep your pet's gums healthy.

3. Daily Feeding of Abrasive Food...

Abrasive foods help to reduce the daily accumulation of plaque and tartar. Raw vegetables, rawhides and other chew things have a beneficial massaging action on the gums.

