

Pawsitive Press

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Annual Dental Cleanings

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Dental and oral health is of paramount importance to the overall health and longevity of our pets. Of all the preventive measures we take to keep our furry friends healthy I believe this is the most important. This part of an overall program of preventive health maintenance is one of the easiest to maintain. However, it is also one of the easiest to ignore. Pets seldom let owners know that there are issues in the mouth that are causing pain and discomfort. They do an excellent job of being stoic and acclimating to their pain as it progresses.

The biggest sign of dental disease that is noticed by owners is bad breath. Bad breath always indicates that there is a problem within the mouth. The problem may be easily rectified by regular brushing or may need extensive dental work to correct the problem. Only by careful physical examination of the mouth can proper advice be given as to what needs to be done to restore optimal oral health.

The proper continual maintenance of oral health centers on bacterial growth. The mouth can grow just about anything and from what I see every day that is absolutely true. The mouth always has bacteria in it. It



was built that way. However, nature intended there to be a population of bacteria that live in harmony, health and balance. When plaque and tartar accumulate on the tooth surfaces this harmonious bacterial balance becomes unbalanced and new "bad" bacteria and other "bugs" begin to thrive and create inflammation in the gum tissues. As time goes on, without regular cleaning, deep pockets of infection and pus invade the gums deeper and deeper. This bacterial invasion causes the normal attachments to the tooth to become weakened. This weakness over time causes the tooth to actually rot out of the mouth if not treated appropriately. This process is called periodontal disease and is similar to what happens to people who suffer from gum disease. When people have deep pockets of infection and inflammation in their mouths they are referred to periodontists for gum management and most of the time that will require surgery.

Tooth loss is not the only thing that happens in the inflamed and infected

mouth of our pets. Their gums will bleed just like people's gums when the mouth is not healthy. Any gum tissue that bleeds with minor abrasion with a Q-tip indicates infection and inflammation in the mouth. Pet's gums bleed when they eat if they have infection and pockets in the gum tissue. You won't generally see this as the amount of bleeding because it doesn't bleed that much. However, when gums bleed the bacteria can enter the blood stream. The body must then control this infection by activation of the white blood cells. Activation of the immune system is an inflammatory response with many by-products that have effects on the health of the entire body. Bacteria may also find themselves trapped in organs or tissues where again another inflammatory process occurs. The body can wall off this bacteria in organs or tissues but this causes minute scar tissue to be created. Over years this takes its toll on organs and tissues decreasing their normal function. So, when pets age this continual inflammatory process with organ and tissue devitalization leads to early organ dysfunction and loss of quality of life. In the past we believed that organs just become less functional with age and believed there was little to do to slow this normal process down. This is why I believe that maintenance of oral health is the most important preventive measure

Dental Cont'd

we can take for our pets. A properly maintained mouth throughout the life of our pets can certainly increase the quality of life and longevity.

In humans we now know that a poorly cared for mouth can set a person up for a heart attack or stroke by the bacteria creating inflammatory by-products that increase the blood's coagulation leading to clots for strokes and heart attacks.

How often should by my pet's mouth be examined?

Every time I do a physical examination on a patient a thorough examination of the mouth is performed. As an absolute minimum annual examination is needed. If anesthesia wasn't required for proper cleaning I would do a thorough cleaning every 6 months just like in people.

Can you see everything you need to see by routine physical examination?

The need for a dental cleaning can be easily determined by a routine physical examination but many dental issues require examination under anesthesia where dental x-rays can be taken and evaluated. Many times there will be the need for correcting dental abnormalities that cannot be seen until a complete examination with x-rays can be completed.

How often will a dental cleaning under anesthesia be necessary?

This depends on each individual pet. My own dog needed a dental cleaning every six to nine months. Most pets need a dental cleaning every year. Some pets go longer. This is why examination of the

mouth every time we see your pet is so important. This way we can catch problems early and get them corrected before they cause tooth loss via untreated gum disease.

What can an owner do to improve oral health?

Brushing the teeth is the only way that you can effectively reduce plaque, tartar and bacterial growth in the mouth. This must be done a minimum of twice weekly however I would not stop you from brushing once per week. The good news is you can't brush too often. We have several different products that you can use to help in the control of bacteria tartar and plaque. Brushing the teeth of our dogs and cats can be easy, difficult or impossible. If brushing is not something an owner can do then we can still maintain great oral health by regular examination and cleaning. My dog was impossible to brush however he only lost one tooth in 15 years of his life because as mentioned above I did his teeth every time they needed it. He was only sick once in his life that required any medical treatment. He died of canine cognitive disorder which is the equivalent of doggie Alzheimer's which I don't think I could have prevented in any way.

What differences are there between dogs and cats with regard to dental issues?

Good question and I'm glad you asked. Dogs and cats don't have cavities in the same sense as people. Dogs are prone to periodontal disease and tooth loss from this process. Cats are not prone to periodontal disease but frequently have a dental condition called feline

odontoclastic resorptive lesions. This is a fancy name for a process that occurs at the enamel and gum line which causes erosive holes in the enamel of the teeth that eventually end up in the pulp cavity allowing bacteria direct access to the blood stream and then to organs and tissues. Bacteria, plaque and tartar that accumulate on the teeth, especially at the gum line, are responsible for these unique cat dental lesions. These erosive lesions cause a great deal of pain. I can tell if the erosion I see on physical exam has made its way to the pulp by tapping a Q-tip on the lesion and seeing if the lower jaw responds with a painful twitch. This is not noticeable to owners. Extraction is the only treatment for this condition.

Isn't dental cleaning with anesthesia expensive?

I believe that proper dental care that keeps a mouth healthy will more than pay for itself in rewards that are monetary in nature by reducing the need for the treatment of unnecessary aging conditions that are directly caused by a lifetime of needless inflammation. This question also makes me think of the Master card commercial. Dental cleaning \$300, quality and longevity of life....priceless!!

My advice to you is this. Look in your pet's mouth. If it looks "nasty" and those pearly whites are not so pearly white or if you smell an odor from your dog's mouth then come and see me because they need some help 😊.

How to Brush your Pet's Teeth

1. Brush your pet's teeth when they are calm and relaxed. Your goal: Set a routine. Working up to brushing daily is ideal. But if their mouth is healthy, even three days a week can make a difference. Without brushing, plaque can build up, putting your pet at risk for bad breath, gum disease, and tooth decay. It can also cause painful infection. Severe infection can spread, causing life-threatening conditions.
2. You'll want to use a toothbrush made for dogs/cats. The bristles are softer and specially angled. Finger brushes can work well for dogs under 30 pounds and cats. For larger dogs, longer handles can give you better reach. Be sure to use pet toothpaste, too. It comes in pet-friendly flavors like poultry or peanut butter. Never use human toothpaste; it contains ingredients that may hurt your pet's stomach.
3. Make sure you're in a spot where your pet is comfortable. Don't stand above your pet, hold them down, or take a threatening stance. Instead, try kneeling or sitting in front of or to the side of them. Gauge your pet's anxiety level. If they seem upset, stop, and try again later. You may need to work on mastering each of the following steps over time
4. Test your pet's willingness to have you touch their mouth by rubbing your finger along the upper gums and teeth. This will help them get used to the feel of something against their teeth. Use light pressure. You may need to get them comfortable with this over a few sessions before moving on.
5. Put some pet toothpaste on your fingertip. Let your pet lick the toothpaste from your fingertip so that they can get used to the texture and taste. If after a few days they refuse to lick more toothpaste after the initial taste, try a different flavor. Hopefully, you'll find one they see as a treat.
6. When pet is used to you opening and touching their mouth, start using the toothpaste and toothbrush together. Lift the upper lip. As you approach the teeth with the brush, angle the bristles so they reach the gum line. Placing them at a 45-degree angle against the teeth will help the bristles massage the gum line and clear away plaque.
7. Brush in small circles, getting top and bottom on each side. As you move the bristles along the gum line, some light bleeding may occur. Slight bleeding every so often is OK. But ongoing or heavy bleeding may mean you're brushing too aggressively or it may be a sign of gum disease. Speak with your vet for advice.
8. Brush a few teeth at a time, working up to more each day. Aim for two minutes total. If your pet resists at first, try starting on the outsides of the canine and back teeth, where plaque tends to collect. If you can get the insides, great. But if you can't get to them as well, don't stress too much. Their coarse tongue helps keep that area cleaner.
9. Keep the mood light while you're brushing your pet's teeth. Talk to them throughout your daily brushing, telling them exactly what you're doing. Remind them what a good dog/cat they are by stroking their jowls or patting their head.
10. When you're finished brushing your pet's teeth, reward them with their favorite treat or extra attention. Always stop when everyone's still having fun. Also remember that good dental care doesn't end with brushing. Certain chews and treats can also help you fight plaque buildup. And don't forget to schedule regular professional dental cleanings. Talk with your vet about how often is right for your pet.



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