

Dental Disease
or
“Mommy, I Smell Something Really Bad in Fluffy’s Mouth”

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One of the most important and overlooked health issues in our four-legged pets is periodontal disease. Literally, this means inflammation and deterioration of the gums, accumulation of tartar (calculus) on the teeth, tooth loosening or decay, and breath that could sink a ship (halitosis).

Your veterinarian will examine your pet’s mouth, gums and teeth during the annual exam. Instead of giving those unnecessary annual vaccines, consider instead the recommendations to have your pet’s teeth cleaned and polished, if needed. Animal hospitals do dental hygiene work just like your regular dentist does. There are machines that scale, and polish the teeth, and hand instruments to get into those hard to reach gum pockets in between and above the teeth. A fluoride gel or foam will be put onto the teeth and then rinsed back off after the dental procedure is finished. The only difference between animal and human dentistry is anatomy (they have a few more teeth than we do), and the fact that pets won’t hold still so they must have anesthesia during the dental. A tube is placed into the airway with a cuff inflated so that no liquid will accidentally go down the airway while your pet is asleep. Machines are used to monitor the heart and respiratory rate, and oxygen concentration in the blood. This insures more safety and peace of mind while your pet is under the effects of injectable anesthetic or inhaled gas anesthesia.

If you keep up on the annual maintenance of good oral health for your pet, then dentals will rarely be needed, or if they are done they will be less complicated and take less time. There are veterinary dental specialists that can do root canals, braces and other specialized procedures that would be warranted or needed on pets.

There are many oral healthcare products available to help keep the gums, and teeth healthy. Such things as special disinfectant type toothpastes or gels can be used on a toothbrush. Dr. Doug prefers, in most cases, the Maxiguard gel made with all natural vitamin C and the mineral zinc. All of these products strive to keep the bacterial count down in the mouth which helps prevent the accumulation of plaque and tartar on the teeth. Plaque is the daily film that coats the entire mouth and tongue. It is composed of bacteria, food particles, minerals and acids that form in the saliva.

You can habituate your cat or dog at a young age to tooth brushing. First, start by just handling the mouth, lifting the lips, getting them used to having your fingers inside the mouth, and making them hold still. Dr. Doug likes to use gravy or meat sauce at first while the pet gets used to all this fuss. They gradually look forward to it, or at least it is not all negative if you give them lots of praise, and make this into a daily ritual. Start with your fingers and move on over time to gauze, cotton balls, small rags or a toothbrush. Water piks and sonic toothbrushes, while very effective in humans, the vibrations and

liquid jets will frighten or cause your pet to cough or gag. Animals don't know how to spit, and they will attempt to swallow all that liquid.

There are a couple of special prescription type every day dry foods which claim to be tartar busters. There are also several kinds of chews and treats available which offer the same thing. Two very popular brands of chew treats are Bullies and Greenies. These are fun to chew, are natural and organic, and dogs love them. If your pet uses these things there will be improved dental health. Contrary to popular belief regular dry food by itself does NOT keep your pets teeth clean, no more than eating cereal all the time would clean your teeth without brushing!

Cats and smaller breeds of dogs seem to have the worst tooth and gum problems when compared to larger breeds of dogs. Our pet's ancestors were originally designed to eat meat, and chew on bones. The tendons, fur, and bones of their prey were nature's little tooth brushes. Dr. Doug has cared for wild mammals for 25 years, and not once has he seen a wild cougar or coyote needing any dental work. What causes most dental problems in pets is simply a lack of an evolutionary appropriate diet. Commercial foods, dry and canned don't allow the teeth and gums to get a daily scrub like they do with raw prey. To those pet owners who have switched over to raw foods for their pets, they have seen what meat and bones will do to keep the dentist away. Daily brushing is rarely needed and dental procedures are almost unheard of. For those dog owners who won't use raw meat just give your dog an uncooked bone. Raw beef bones, given weekly will clean the teeth and keep them that way. Even dogs with a large accumulation of tartar will clean their own teeth if they regularly will chew on raw bones, making future dentals unnecessary. Of course you can't just switch diets in one day, but a gradual change over to raw foods can usually be accomplished with most dogs, cats, and young ferrets. Specific diet recommendations will be covered in a future column.

Don't feed your pets cooked bones as they are apt to splinter, and won't digest very well like raw bones will. The bones should be large enough and hard enough for the pet to chew on without swallowing medium to large chunks that might get stuck (the small pieces are not a problem at all). Soup bones (joint knuckle ends) are sold in grocery stores and usually have a lot of cartilage on them. The dog may love them, and they will help the teeth and gums immensely, but the extra cartilage may cause nausea and vomiting to occur. Dr. Doug likes to give the middle parts of the leg bones (the shaft), cut to fit the size of the dog's mouth. Puppies should be started out at a young age on bones so that they will learn proper bone chewing etiquette. Occasionally a dog will fracture a tooth while chewing on a raw bone. This cannot be prevented unless bones are not used at all. This indicates that the dog has softer enamel in the tooth than is normal, which is a constitutional problem. Always watch your dog at first to make sure everything is going well, until they get the hang of it. Cats won't chew bones much, if at all, so we just grind up the bone, and mix them into the raw meat. For pets with sore mouths, infected gums or loose teeth, a dental procedure is usually needed so the mouth can heal, and then introduce the bones and chew treats.