

ASK THE VET

February is Pet Dental Health Month
Have you brushed your pets' teeth today?

Did you know that by age three years approximately 80% of dogs and 75% of cats have developed periodontal disease? Cats and dogs seldom get cavities like us. The most common dental problem we find is far worse - it's called "Periodontal Disease."

Disease starts when food material, bacteria and saliva accumulate and adhere to the tooth surface forming a soft "plaque." If soft plaque is not removed, regularly it becomes a hard "chalk like" substance called tartar. Tartar buildup below the gum line causes inflammation of the gum tissue (gingivitis) and the lining of the tooth socket (periodontitis). Gums then become inflamed and begin to separate from the teeth, causing a pocket like space to form. Bacteria then move into this space to cause further infection and teeth begin to loosen. Periodontal disease is an infection that, left untreated, can lead to tooth decay and loss, as well as spread into the bloodstream potentially causing kidney, liver, and heart problems. This is very painful for your pet.

Red swollen gums are an indication that infection is below the gumline, the cause of bad breath, bleeding gums and tooth loss. Did you know that we only see one third of the tooth? The rest is under the gumline, that is why it is so important to take care of your pets' teeth.

Some signs of dental disease are bad breath, yellow-brown crust on teeth, change in eating habits (*chewing differently, going to food bowl but not eating, dropping food out of mouth*), abnormal drooling, bleeding gums and tooth loss, pawing at the mouth.

When necessary, per veterinary recommendation, a professional dental health care cleaning needs to be done by a veterinarian and requires your pet to be under anesthesia to be done thoroughly and correctly. The dental care consists of an oral exam of the teeth, gums, tongue and mouth by the veterinarian then the technician scales (scrapes off) the teeth with special tools. After scaling the teeth are polished to leave the surface smooth. If polishing is not done a rough surface will be left after the scaling which allows more surface area for bacteria to attach to.

Fortunately, with regular dental care and dental cleanings at your veterinarian, gingivitis and periodontal disease can be prevented.

Now, you may be thinking, "brush my pets' teeth?" "I didn't know that was possible" or "my pet would never let me do that." Although nothing can take the place of brushing, there are many products available to make caring for your pets' teeth easier.

Some of the products available are enzymatic chews, dental bones, food specially formulated to scrape the tartar off the teeth, pre-moistened pads to wipe the teeth and an additive to mix in drinking water. Just feeding them dry food is not enough to keep their teeth and gums healthy. Look for the Veterinary Oral Health Council's seal of approval (VOHC) on products advertised for dental health to indicate that the product is approved for the reduction of plaque and tartar.

If you decide to try brushing, be patient with your pet and keep trying. Gradually get your pet used to brushing by doing a few teeth each day. There are several flavors of toothpaste, specifically formulated for pets, so don't give up trying if your pet is resistant. Do not use human toothpaste with your pet.

Whichever product you decide to use, you will be doing your pet a favor and helping them to live a longer, healthier life.

Dental facts : Puppies have 28 temporary teeth that erupt at around 3 to 4 weeks of age. Dogs have 42 permanent teeth that begin to emerge around four months of age. Kittens have 26 temporary teeth that begin to erupt at about 2 to 3 weeks. Cats have 30 permanent teeth that emerge at around 3 to 4 months of age.