More than just a pretty smile

Looking after your pet’s teeth is one of the most important things you can do for their health and wellbeing.

Dental disease is often underestimated - both in how frequently it occurs and the significance it has on the affected animal. Your vet can assess your pet’s teeth and guide you on dental care, whether it is home care or a dental procedure performed under a general anaesthetic.

Dental problems in dogs and cats can range in severity from tartar and gingivitis through to bone loss, tooth root abscesses and rotten teeth.

Dental disease often starts early in life, with vets commonly seeing tartar in animals as young as one or two years old. This is not particularly surprising when we consider that dogs and cats have teeth and gums that are quite similar to our own. While people brush their teeth twice daily, floss and use mouthwash to maintain dental hygiene, many pets receive little preventative care throughout their life.

People who own dogs and cats are often surprised when their vet finds problems with their pet’s teeth. It is rare for them to show evidence of pain, as stopping eating generally only occurs at the most extreme end of dental disease. We know ourselves that problems with our teeth can be extremely painful - even with relatively minimal disease compared to what our furry friends suffer from. However, a dog or cat’s instinct is to keep eating for survival, so they will eat through tremendous amounts of pain, potentially downplaying the severity of the problem. This can make dental disease more difficult to detect.

Good dental hygiene starts with at home care. Your vet can advise you on the best way to do this dependent upon your pet and their behaviour, size, current issues and dietary requirements.

Specially designed dental diets, chews and water additives can be used. However, the gold standard of at home dental care is tooth brushing. Many people just cannot imagine
brushing their cat or dogs’ teeth, but surprisingly many animals do take to it well. It is often easier to start when they are young or train them to accept it using positive reinforcement.

Species appropriate toothpaste must be used which is flavoured to increase appeal (chicken flavour is much more acceptable to dogs and cats than mint!) and is safe for them to swallow. A soft children’s toothbrush or a finger toothbrush can be used. Brushing is best performed daily; however there is still a benefit in a few times per week if you cannot commit to daily brushing.

Once dental disease is detected, your vet may recommend a dental procedure. It can only be performed safely, painlessly and thoroughly in an animal under anaesthetic, as full assessment of the teeth requires probing of the gums and dental x-rays. These tests are very important as teeth are much like icebergs, with two thirds of the tooth being below the gum line and therefore out of view.

Once the mouth has been assessed, the teeth will be scaled and polished, very similarly to how humans have their teeth treated at the dentist. If any diseased teeth are detected, they will generally be extracted to remove the source of pain and infection.

Procedures such as root canals can be used to retain damaged teeth under certain circumstances, and this would need to be performed by a vet with additional training in dentistry. Many owners worry about their animals being able to eat once teeth are removed, but dogs and cats are remarkably resilient in this department, and generally eat normally and comfortably once healing has occurred.

Dental disease often starts early in life.

So next time you visit your vet, ask about your pet’s teeth and how you can keep them in the best possible health. Your dog or cat will thank you for it!

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