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Take my pet to the Dentist??

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How often do you brush your teeth? You probably know without really counting: once or twice daily, after every meal, before meeting with friends or going out somewhere? Imagine if the answer was “never!” or “every 7 to 14 years.” The result would be **bad breath**, dental **tartar**, **gum disease** and **periodontal disease**, cavities and loss of teeth, not to mention that you may not have a lot of “close” friends. The result of such bad hygiene would be social rejection, and serious health risk to you. This is the *typical* picture, however, of our pets’ dental health.

Our pets’ dental needs mirror ours in many ways. There may not be quite the same social stigma to bad breath, but the affect of poor care results in the same oral and health risks as their owners. To compare, pets acquire baby teeth which are replaced by adult teeth as they enter adolescence, around 4-6 months of age. The adult teeth are permanent and are subject to the same problems we encounter: **trauma, decay, and chronic gum disease**. As with people, some care can be taken to avoid each of these problems.

Trauma is never planned, so fractured teeth from external trauma will likely happen despite our efforts, but avoiding very hard chew objects is wise. Real bones are notoriously hard on teeth and very often result in painful fractures. Even tiny “chip” fractures of the teeth may result in an open pulp chamber which later becomes abscessed. Chewing ice is equally bad for your pet as it is for their owner. However it occurs, a dental fracture usually needs to be addressed. If addressed immediately, within about 24 hours, teeth can be sealed, or root canal procedures can be performed to prevent later loss of the entire tooth. Dental X-rays are very helpful in identifying root abscesses of the more chronic fractures, and extraction of the offending tooth is needed to resolve the pain and infection that is present. Recognizing facial or jaw swellings for potential abscesses can allow your pet to be treated before the condition worsens.

Decay (cavities) is much less a problem in veterinary dentistry than in human dentistry, but does occur on occasion. The lesions are dark in color on the enamel surface, and are painful “pits” that may eventually reach the pulp chamber. When the pulp chamber is involved, pain and infection is certain to be present. “*Resorptive lesions*” or “*odontoclastic resorptive lesions*,” are somewhat more common in cats than dogs and typically result in loss of the entire tooth. The roots or enamel surface may be under attack from the body and result in loss of integrity of the tooth and gradual resorption. Most commonly, these lesions are noticed because of the painful gum tissue growing up over the decayed portion of the tooth. It is not completely understood why this process of resorption occurs, *but there seems to be a strong correlation with overall poor hygiene* and tartar formation in affected patients. Affected teeth should be extracted as soon as they are noticed so that pain can be resolved. Often, multiple teeth are affected necessitating a number of extractions simultaneously. Though the dental procedure is very involved to extract so many teeth, a comfortable and happy pet is the end result.

Gum disease, or gingivitis is the most common dental condition seen in both dogs and cats. The gums appear bright red when they are inflamed from bacteria. As pockets continue to enlarge between the tooth crown

and the gum margin, the colonies of bacteria increase, inflammation worsens, and gingivitis progressively worsens. Gum disease is a pretty visible warning, along with **bad breath**, that things are going wrong in the mouth. Too often, this warning is ignored leading to a progression of dental disease that usually results in pain and loss of teeth. I try to make the point almost daily, “bad breath is NEVER NORMAL.” It reflects bad things going on in the oral cavity: infection, necrosis, tumors.

Cleaning the teeth of plaque with routine at-home brushing, or cleaning tartar from the teeth by professional ultrasonic scaling and perhaps gingivectomy to reduce the pockets is the best way to halt the dental disease.

Periodontal disease is inflammation and infection of the periodontal ligament, those tiny ligaments that hold each tooth in place. As gingivitis and infection progresses, the periodontal ligament is progressively destroyed and the result is loose teeth. The periodontal ligament is permanently lost and cannot be repaired. Once again, the warning signs are typically **gum disease** and **bad breath**. When treated early on, the periodontal disease can be slowed or halted and the affected tooth can be saved. However, when extraction(s) are necessary there is just no other option to restore a healthy mouth, and restore comfort to our pet. Some pets may need as many as 20+ extractions because of badly advanced dental disease, and a terribly painful mouth. This may ultimately require a soft diet for some of our tooth-challenged pets, but is better than leaving the painful and infected teeth in place.

So what? So what can we do? Is bad breath and dental disease in our pets just inevitable and to be accepted? Well, yes it probably is inevitable. But it should not be accepted any more than allowing any other type of infection or illness to go unchecked. Most pets by the age of 4 yrs old have dental disease. Dental disease may be the most common, yet damaging problem that our pets face. It can lead to a host of problems: oral pain, poor appetite, depression, grouchy disposition, and infection of distant organs via bacteria in the bloodstream. The key is early detection and care, the best type of prevention we have. Daily tooth brushing can be started at a young age to teach your pet acceptance, and will keep the bacteria-laden plaque off the teeth to a large extent. Pet toothpaste is necessary, applied with a toothbrush suitable for the size of the pet. Rawhides and nylon bones for dogs, and dry kibble food for dogs and cats help to keep at least some of the plaque and tartar reduced. But nothing will replace timely and thorough ultrasonic cleaning and polishing of the teeth to preserve good dental health and recognize dental disease early-on. Many pets have a need for ultrasonic cleaning on an annual basis; others may need it twice per year. And some of the lucky ones out there need it much less often.

You and your veterinarian should decide together what frequency of cleaning your dog or cat may need. At our hospital, we make it a habit to examine the oral cavity and teeth every visit, and critically evaluate when a dental cleaning may be needed next. It normally is not a question of “if” as it is of “when.” Hopefully, gone are the days of multiple extractions because the dental disease went unnoticed and got too advanced to save the teeth. (insert photo of toothless pet here)