

A Healthy Mouth Makes a Healthy Pet

February is pet dental health awareness month. Nearly 85% of our pets over the age of 7 already have dental disease and some suffer silently. Periodontal disease is the most common dental disease affecting our pets and develops when the bacteria in the mouth mix with the mucin in the saliva and forms a white, sticky substance called plaque. If the plaque is not removed on a daily basis either by brushing or by mechanical means, such as dental chews, the bacteria adds minerals from the saliva and forms a hard substance called tartar. The tartar is not easily removed once deposited on the tooth. The bacteria then continues to spread, creating by-products and toxins that began to irritate the gum and slowly works its way between the gum and the tooth. The by-products then begin to eat away at the bony structure holding the tooth in the socket, loosening the tooth and infecting the gum and tissue. The bacteria can now enter the blood stream, showering the body and causing infections in the heart valves, kidneys and other major organs. Signs of dental disease can include excessive drooling, dropping food when eating, eating on one side of mouth, pain when eating or a foul odor coming from the mouth. Some dogs do not exhibit any outward signs until the disease is well advanced. What can you do to help keep your pet's mouth healthy?

1. Brush your pet's teeth. It is best to begin getting your pet used to brushing when they are still young. Start by lifting the lips and giving a treat when they oblige. Put toothpaste designed for pets on your finger and rub it on their teeth. As you and your pet progress, you can start using a toothbrush. Do not use human toothpaste. It has fluoride in it that can be toxic when swallowed. I have yet to teach a pet to rinse and spit. In older pets, a dental exam should be done before you start to brush. If there is already some dental disease present, fractured teeth or exposed nerves, the brushing will be very painful for the pet.
2. Use dental chews that are designed to help remove the plaque. CET chew, Greenies and Enzadent chews are examples of chews made to remove the plaque and tartar. Do not use real bones, cow hooves or other really hard products. These can result in fracturing the teeth.
3. There are special diets available that are also designed to promote dental health. Ask your veterinarian which one they recommend.
4. Bring your pet in for an annual dental exam by your veterinarian. If there is significant amount of tartar visible on the teeth, there is a good amount beneath the gum-line not visible. It may be time for a professional prophylaxis by your veterinarian. Once the teeth are cleaned, it is then up to you to keep them that way.

What is involved in a dental prophylaxis? The pet prophylaxis and a human prophylaxis have many commonalities. The main difference is a thorough pet prophylaxis involves general anesthesia. The anesthesia used in veterinary medicine today is a lot safer and can be done on older pets. Pre-anesthetic blood work is recommended to screen for underlying diseases such as diabetes or kidney disease. An intra-venous catheter is inserted for administration of fluids and medications. The pet is then intubated with an endotracheal tube and maintained on gas anesthetic and oxygen. A cuff on the tube is inflated to keep fluids from the mouth from entering the lungs and to maintain the proper flow of anesthetic and oxygen. A pulse oximeter is used to monitor the oxygen saturation, heart rate and breathing. Radiographs are then taken to view the roots for any problems that cannot be seen on visual inspection. The mouth is also examined closely for any tumors or other defects. The teeth are then cleaned with an ultrasound dental scaler. A broad tip is used to get the bulk of the tartar off the main part of the tooth. A very thin tip is used to go beneath the gum and clean what can not be seen. A periodontal probe is then inserted around the tooth checking for any sub-gingival pockets that may need further treatment with antibiotic gel. Teeth with significant disease are extracted. If desired, some teeth can be saved with extensive salvage techniques such as root planing, root canals and crowns. Veterinary dentists with specialized training can perform these procedures if the owner desires. Because of the cost and after care needed for these procedures, the tooth is sometimes extracted. Pets with significant amount of dental disease do much better without the diseased teeth than with them. The main point is to start preventative maintenance earlier to avoid the extractions. Once the teeth are scaled and the diseased teeth are treated, the tooth surface is then polished, just like human dentistry. The polishing also makes a smooth surface to slow down the plaque from sticking to the teeth. The teeth are then treated with fluoride to help strengthen the enamel. The veterinarian will then recommend to apply Oravet to the teeth. Oravet also coats the tooth and keeps plaque from sticking to the tooth. The Oravet must then be applied on a weekly basis by the owner for it to be effective. Antibiotics are also given and sent home to help with the infection. Depending on the amount of dental work performed, pain medication may also be given and sent home. Once home, it is up to the owner to take care of the teeth to keep them healthy. Schedule an appointment with your veterinarian and develop a dental health plan for your pet. A healthy mouth makes for a healthy and happy pet.

About the Author

Dr. Debra Garrison is a veterinarian and owns a small animal hospital in Spring, Texas. Her goal is to promote the bond between pets, their owners and their veterinarians, the other family doctor. You can visit her clinic website at <http://www.tvet.com>.

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