

## **Dental Health**

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As the old adage goes, "Ignore your teeth, they'll go away." Well the same thing applies to the teeth of your pets as well. All too often the condition of a pet's teeth are ignored until a real problem develops and that is not just tooth loss as severe systemic disease affecting the heart, kidney and other organs can develop because of dental disease.

As part of a routine physical examination we evaluate the teeth and gums determining if dental disease is present, the degree of the disease and recommend which steps should be taken to correct the condition. Most often routine brushing/cleaning is all that is required to help maintain good dental health. Unfortunately, the condition may have progressed to a point where more aggressive means are required such as a dental cleaning under anesthesia, gum treatment and sometimes even extractions of rotted or abscessed teeth. After the dental procedure, then good home care must be implemented to prevent the repeated need for dental procedures.

Be on the alert for any signs of dental disease in your pets. Usually one of the first things you may notice is "dragon breath" caused by a buildup of tartar, gum irritation and bacteria in the mouth. Get in the habit of inspecting your pet's mouth. Do you see tartar build up on the teeth? Discoloration of teeth? Loosened teeth? Rotting teeth? Are the gums reddened and inflamed? Are the gums swollen? Are growths present on the gums or in the mouth? Is there recession of gum tissue around the teeth? Are roots of the teeth exposed? These are just a few things you should be on the alert for which need attention and should be corrected before a real problem develops that will have a systemic effect.

The danger of severe dental disease is the potential for systemic disease which could lead to life-threatening conditions. An infected mouth will have increased amounts of bacteria present. The bacteria can then travel through the blood stream and end up in certain organs with devastating results. For example bacteria can be carried by the blood and end up in the heart or on the heart valves, damaging them permanently (vegetative endocarditis). In addition the bacteria can be carried to the liver and kidney damaging these organs as well. Many other conditions may also result as well so prompt attention to dental disease is highly recommended.

If a dental procedure is required/recommended, the pet will need to be put under anesthesia. If we could have them sitting in a chair and have them rinse/spit on our command then maybe we could do cleanings without it, but to do it properly we have no alternative. Because they will be put under anesthesia, we require presurgical bloodwork to be sure that your pet is in good condition for the procedure. As dental disease can cause systemic problems, we want problems identified before the pet is anesthetized. If

there are problems, we will postpone the procedure, correct them and then perform the dentistry.

When the pet is under anesthesia they are on IV fluids, monitoring equipment and both a doctor as well as a technician are present during the procedure. The teeth are cleaned with an ultrasonic scaler, extractions (if needed) are performed, the gums are treated, teeth are polished and antibiotics are given. The pet will be able to go home the same day of a dental procedure.

Follow up care depends upon the severity of the condition. There is more after care if there were extractions, usually not too much is involved if it was just a cleaning. Occasionally, with infected teeth/mouths antibiotics will be needed to be given at home for a period. But most importantly, it is the dedication to routine care at home that will prevent further problems in the future. Dietary changes may also be required.

Get in the habit of checking the dental condition of your pets and become proactive in their care by routinely brushing/cleaning their teeth. By doing so, you can prevent more costly dental procedures in the future. But if they do require such a procedure, do it sooner than later as it will only get worse and will lead to more problems down the road.