

## Dental health -get your teeth into this!!!

Something that a lot of pet owners' are unaware of is that dental care is as important for your pet as it is for you! Much like humans, problems arise when plaque and tartar is allowed to build up on teeth and leads to gingivitis (gum disease) and then progresses to periodontal disease (see table below). Generally, dogs have 42 teeth, cats have 30 and many pets will need dental treatment at some point during their life. Important factors affecting dental health include dental hygiene routines, diet, breed predisposition, immune status, and sometimes age. Certain breeds such as Siamese cats are prone to periodontal disease and there are developmental conditions such as impacted or unerupted teeth that are common in young patients. More commonly, problems arise due to lack of hygiene routines and pets' diets not providing sufficient removal of plaque to prevent build up. Also immune-compromised animals, such as animals undergoing long-term steroid therapy or systemic disease such as diabetes may have compromised dental health.

The most common signs of dental disease are bad breath, excessive drooling, difficulty eating, inflamed gums, tumours in the gums, cysts under the tongue and loose teeth.

### The Progression of Dental health /disease

| Steps                         | Signs/Symptoms  | Caused by  |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>1) Halitosis</b>           | Bad breath is generally the first sign of a mouth problem                     | Bacteria grows from food particles caught between the teeth or by gum infection that is not adequately treated |
| <b>2) Gingivitis</b>          | Inflammation of the gums including bleeding, red, swollen gums and bad breath | Mainly caused by accumulation of plaque, tartar and disease-producing bacteria above and below the gum line.   |
| <b>3) Periodontal disease</b> | Infection between the tooth and the gum that                                  | Progression of steps 1 and 2 without adequate treatment and  |

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|  | results in the inability to eat properly, bad breath, loose teeth, sneezing and nasal discharge. | can result in the spread of infection to the rest of the body. |
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Oral abscesses, ulcers and tumours may also be involved in undermining the dental health of a pet therefore it is vital once the first signs are spotted that the pet receives a detailed dental examination from their vet.

A veterinary dental examination of a pet may include the following, obviously depending on the willingness of the patient to co operate:-

- Initial check of the symmetry of the head as asymmetry may indicate tooth abscess, tumours, external infections, bone disorders
- Palpation of lymph nodes and salivary glands to see if enlarged or any obvious changes to indicate infections etc
- Note any odour coming from animals oral cavity and differentiate if it is coming from the airway, oesophagus or stomach
- Check for obvious foreign bodies or food remnants
- Check of gums and teeth for inflammation, common changes and stability
- Check for any other symptoms that may suggest underlying systemic disease or viral disease

### **Treatments**

In the majority of cases, treatment of any pet's dental problem is similar to human dental treatment except that a general anaesthetic is required in order to fully assess the severity of dental disease and to perform basic treatment. Basic treatment normally involves gingival probing (assessing the depth of the gum pockets to ensure gingival health), check for cavities/extractions etc and the dental scaling and polishing of the teeth (similar to human dental cleaning).

A pre-dental blood work is recommended to check on the overall health of the pet and to ensure that all values are within normal ranges in order to reduce any risks possible prior to the anaesthesia. Antibiotic treatment may be warranted prior to the dental to calm infection and reduce possibility of complications.

### **Prevention Programmes and Post Dental Treatment**

During nursing clinics, a homecare programme should be devised that takes into consideration an animal's character and an owner's capabilities. In the case of prevention for young pups, gauze or cloth may be suggested to wipe teeth initially. Tooth brushing is most effective for removing plaque and preventing calculus formation but older pets may not be very cooperative. In this case, the owners need to build up the pet's tolerance by slowly introducing the pet specific toothpaste and brushing subsequently. Normally finger brushes are initially used and special attention is needed at the gum line where plaque can congregate easily and is not dislodged by chewing. To achieve this, initially retract the lips and place the brush or your gauze-wrapped finger at a 45-degree angle to the teeth and clean in small, circular motions.

Other dental health products to aid in dislodging calculus and plaque include dental chews and special diets with specific kibble and special ingredients to help enhance oral health. Sometimes chlorhexidine-based products may be suggested to aid in the removal of plaque, and they also have properties effective against some bacteria, viruses and fungi.

So why not get your teeth into this and give your pet that dazzling smile!!!!

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