

## **Preventative Dental Care for Pets**

Dental care and oral hygiene are just as important for our pets as for ourselves. Good oral hygiene should form part of our pet's normal health care routine.

Plaque is composed of bacteria, proteins, sugars, white blood cells and water. As this accumulates on your pet's teeth, you may notice an unpleasant mouth odour. As the plaque combines with food particles and minerals from saliva, it hardens to form tartar. Plaque and tartar accumulate on teeth daily. This leads to gingivitis (inflammation of the gums), periodontitis (inflammation of the tissue around the teeth) and periodontal disease (inflammation and destruction of the support tissues of the teeth). If not treated, this scenario will progress until all the bone and ligaments which hold the tooth in place are destroyed and the tooth falls out. This is the most common cause of premature tooth loss in pets.

Healthy teeth should appear white (or pale yellow as they age), with gums a light healthy pink. Plaque and tartar discolour teeth leaving them yellow to grey. Gums become red and bleed easily as gingivitis takes hold. You will notice an unpleasant mouth odour with gingivitis. Some pets will change their eating behaviour or refuse to eat due to the pain. The bacteria can also spread from the mouth, via the blood stream, to cause infection in remote parts of the body, especially the heart, liver and kidneys. These complications are significant and potentially fatal if left untreated.

These are the reasons we advocate routine dental care for pets. There are many alternatives currently available. The method which best suits your situation is your choice. Not all pets will accept all types of routine care. It is easiest to start when your pet is very young, but the older pet is able to adapt to change if they are given time and encouragement.

### **Dental home care options include:**

#### **1) REGULAR BRUSHING**

Daily brushing of teeth is the best and most efficient home dental care we can provide. This enables you to remove the plaque which builds up each day. If daily brushing is not possible, try at least twice weekly. Try starting with a piece of cloth or gauze, gently rubbing the outer surface of the teeth and gums in a circular motion. This will help you pet get used to you cleaning his/her teeth.

This stage may take days to weeks before your pet will allow you to clean their teeth easily. Start with short sessions, remember to always praise your pet and try to make the experience as enjoyable as possible. You need only clean the outer surface of teeth and gums, your pet will do a reasonable job on the inner surfaces with their own rough tongue.

Once your pet is comfortable with teeth cleaning, you can try introducing a soft pet toothbrush and pet toothpaste. Pet toothpastes are flavoured, low frothing, low in fluoride and are designed to be swallowed. NEVER use human toothpaste in your pet.

Regular brushing of your pet's teeth also gives you the opportunity to check teeth and gums regularly. You will become acquainted with the normal appearance of your pet's mouth, so you will spot abnormalities and access treatment earlier, before a permanent problem occurs.

#### **2) CHEWING**

Raw bones with meat attached for chewing, dental "treats" eg Greenies, rawhides and chew toys are all good mechanical ways to keep teeth clean. If bones are to be used, they must be big enough to be chewed and not swallowed. Raw, uncut marrowbones or lamb shanks are usually suitable. Raw chicken necks and wings may be used with smaller dogs (provided they are not overweight). Always remember that all teeth are not involved in chewing, so all teeth will not be cleaned.

### **3) ORAL CLEANING GELS, WATER ADDITIVES, FOOD ADDITIVES**

Dental/oral gels and washes used daily are chemical means of reducing plaque and bacteria. Many include disinfectants to kill bacteria, others also include chemicals which help break down tartar or prevent plaque attaching to the tooth surface. Gels are applied to the outer surface of the back teeth (mouth movement spreads them to other teeth/surfaces). Water additives are placed into fresh water daily. Eg. Aquadent, Maxi-Guard oral cleaning gel.

Plaque Off is a new product, made from North Sea algae which is able to reduce existing tartar and prevent new deposits. We have had encouraging results so far. It is a small amount of powder added to food daily.

### **4) DENTAL CARE DIETS**

Specially designed, often oversized kibbles help to mechanically clean teeth as they are eaten. Unlike normal kibbles, these diets do not shatter and turn to mush as soon as they are eaten. Rather, they hold their shape, so the teeth are rasped each time your pet bites through the biscuit. These diets are complete, balanced, quality foods, they can be used as the sole diet or can replace part of your pet's normal diet. Varieties include Hill's t/d, Science Diet Oral Care, Advance Dental.

#### **Other ways we may be able to help:**

Any of the above options can be used alone or in combination. Obviously the more intensive the treatment, the better the results. Your pet may of course have ideas or behaviours that limit your options.

Regular visits to the dentist are an important (if sometimes dreaded) part of our own dental care. Dental checks for your pet are just as important. This is part of our routine health check with every vaccination, but can be done more frequently. Your vet will be able to advise you on the best dental care for your pet. If there is already a significant tartar build up, your vet may recommend we perform a dental prophylaxis. This involves the same scale and polish you may have experienced, but for your pet involves an anaesthetic - no pet will sit still and "open wide". A professional clean is the only way to fully remove all plaque and tartar from the teeth. Regular veterinary dental cleaning will help keep your pet's teeth in tip top condition. The interval between such cleaning will depend on the home dental care program and the individual pet - the better the home care, the fewer times a professional clean is required.

Should you have any further questions regarding home dental care for your pet, or should you wish to order any of the home care products, please do not hesitate to speak to one of our staff. We are here to keep your loved pets as healthy and happy as possible.