

Pawsitive Press

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The health of the mouth is the gateway to the health of the rest of the body

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When we talk about dental and oral health in our furry companions, we are talking about a topic that is critical to the overall health and longevity of our pets. There are many things we can do on a preventive basis for our pets. However, of all the things we do to keep our furry friends healthy I believe oral health is the most important. Oral healthcare as part of an overall program of preventive health maintenance is one of the easiest to maintain. This is second only to weight management. However, dental healthcare is also one of the easiest to ignore. I frequently hear from pet owners that pets on the farm never even saw a veterinarian let alone a veterinary dentist and they lived a very long life. I answer this by indicating that we only see the pets and people that have lived despite unattended healthcare needs. There are many that have passed at an age that has been less than



their absolute potential life span.



Pets seldom let owners know that there are issues in the mouth that are causing pain and discomfort and ongoing inflammation. Dogs and cats do an excellent job of being stoic and acclimating to their pain as it progresses. Rarely do pet owners lift the lips of their pet to examine what may be “growing” in their mouths. If you don’t see “pearly whites” next to healthy gums, there is trouble brewing.

The biggest sign of dental disease that is noticed by owners is bad breath. Bad breath always indicates that there is a problem within the mouth. The problem may be easily rectified by regular brushing or may need extensive dental

work to correct the problem. Only by careful physical examination of the mouth can proper advice be given as to what needs to be done to restore optimal oral health.

The proper continual maintenance of oral health centers on bacterial growth. Uncontrolled overgrowth of bacteria with the help of food and saliva creates a nasty environment that creates major inflammation. The mouth can grow just about anything and from what I see every day in practice this is true. The mouth always has bacteria in it. It was built that way. However, nature intended there to be a population of bacteria that live in harmony, health, and balance. When plaque and tartar accumulate on the tooth surfaces this harmonious bacterial balance becomes unbalanced and new “bad” bacteria and other “bugs” begin to thrive and create inflammation in the gum tissues. As time goes on, without regular cleaning, deep pockets of infection and pus invade the gums deeper and deeper. This bacterial invasion causes the normal attachments to the tooth to become weakened. This weakness over time causes the tooth to rot out of the mouth if not treated appropriately. This process is called periodontal disease and is like what happens to people who suffer from gum disease. When

Pet Dental Health Cont'd

people have deep pockets of infection and inflammation in their mouths, they are referred to periodontists for gum management and most of the time that will require surgery.

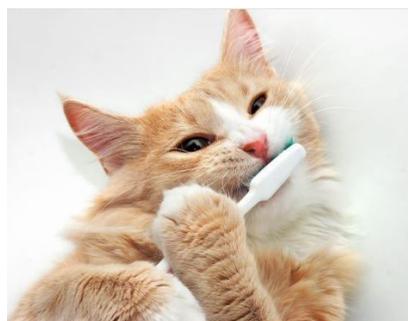


Tooth loss is not the only thing that happens in the inflamed and infected mouth of our pets. Their gums will bleed just like people's gums when the mouth is not healthy. Any gum tissue that bleeds with minor abrasion with a Q-tip indicates infection and inflammation in the mouth. Pet's gums bleed when they eat if they have infection and pockets in the gum tissue. You won't generally see this as the amount of bleeding because it doesn't bleed that much. However, when gums bleed the bacteria can enter the blood stream. The body must then control this infection by activation of the white blood cells.

Activation of the immune system is an inflammatory response with many by-products that have effects on the health of the entire body. Bacteria may also find themselves trapped in organs or tissues where again another inflammatory process occurs. The body can wall off these bacteria in organs or tissues, but this causes minute scar tissue to be created. Over years this takes its toll on organs and tissues decreasing their normal function. So, when pets age this continual inflammatory process with organ and tissue devitalization leads to early organ dysfunction and loss of quality of

life. In the past we believed that organs just become less functional with age and believed there was little to do to slow this normal process down. Therefore, I believe that maintenance of oral health is the most important preventive measure we can take for our pets. A properly maintained mouth throughout the life of our pets can certainly increase the quality of life and longevity.

In humans we now know that a poorly cared for mouth can set a person up for a heart attack or stroke by the bacteria creating inflammatory by-products that increase the blood's coagulation leading to clots for strokes and heart attacks. One of my good friends in human cardiology described a 50 yr. old gentleman with a horrible infection of his heart valves that occurred 1 month after a tooth cleaning that he had not done for 20 yrs. Bacteria from this major infection in the mouth found its way to the heart and almost destroyed it.



How often should by my pet's mouth be examined?

At a minimum an annual examination is needed. If anesthesia wasn't required for proper cleaning, I would do a thorough cleaning every 6 months just like in people.

How often will a dental cleaning under anesthesia be necessary?

This depends on each individual pet. My own dog needed a dental cleaning every six to nine months. Most pets need a dental cleaning every year. Some pets go longer. Therefore, examination of the mouth every time we see your pet is so important. This way we can catch problems early and get them corrected before they cause tooth loss via untreated gum disease.

What can an owner do to improve oral health?

Brushing the teeth is the most effective way to reduce plaque, tartar, and bacterial growth in the mouth. This must be done a minimum of twice weekly however I would not stop you from brushing once per week. The good news is you can't brush too often.

Can I get my pet's teeth cleaned properly without anesthesia?

NO! The most important part of dental cleaning under anesthesia is the ability to take x-rays and see what is happening below the gum line where we can't see. Cleaning only what you can see is only part of the story. Examining the mouth without x-rays will allow infection below the gum line to persist and place a great burden on the body. Also, cleaning below the gum line is impossible in our patients without anesthesia.

Please contact us if you have any questions about your pet's dental health, we are here to help!



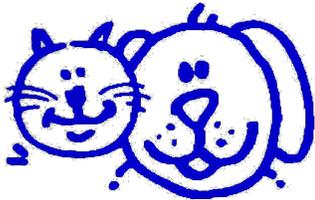
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