



February is Pet Dental Awareness Month

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Importance of Pet Dental Health

Article taken from the AAHA Pet Care Library

Would you let years go by between visits to the dentist? Probably not! Your pet's dental health is just as important to his or her overall health as your dental health is to your general health. To help our veterinarians and our team provide excellent dental care for dogs and cats and educate pet owners about the importance of proper dental care throughout their pets' lives, the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) has developed the AAHA Dental Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats. Major highlights of these guidelines are covered in this article.

Why Dental Care?

Dental care of dogs and cats is one of the most commonly overlooked areas of pet health care. In fact, a recent AAHA study showed that approximately two-thirds of pet owners do not provide the dental care that is recommended as essential by veterinarians. What's more, the American Veterinary Dental Society reports that 80 percent of dogs and 70 percent of cats show signs of oral disease by age three.

Dental disease doesn't affect just the mouth. It can lead to more serious health problems including heart, lung and kidney disease, which makes it all the more important that you provide your pets with proper dental care from the start.

AAHA's Dental Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats were designed to provide veterinarians and their teams with a working framework for small animal dentistry practice, including dental examinations and cleaning and surgical procedures. Your pet's dental health isn't just in the hands of your veterinarian though. Pet owner education regarding treatment options for optimum dental health and the importance of home care are emphasized throughout the guidelines.

Periodontal Disease

Fido's dog breath and Tabby's tuna breath aren't something to be ignored – they could be indicative of an oral problem, and the sooner you have it treated by your veterinarian (and learn to care for it yourself), the sooner you and your pet can smile proudly.

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Periodontal disease is an infection of the tissue surrounding the teeth that takes hold in progressive stages. It starts out as a bacterial film called plaque. The bacteria attach to the teeth. When the bacteria die they can be calcified by calcium in saliva. This forms a hard, rough substance called tartar or calculus which allows more plaque to accumulate. Initially, plaque is soft and brushing or chewing hard food and toys can dislodge it. If left to spread, plaque can lead to gingivitis, an inflammation of the gums, causing them to become red and swollen and to bleed easily.

As plaque and calculus develop below the gum line, professional cleaning will be needed to help manage it. If the plaque and tartar buildup continues unchecked, infection can form around the root of the tooth.

In the final stages of periodontal disease, the tissues surrounding the tooth are destroyed, the bony socket holding the tooth in erodes and the tooth becomes loose. This is a very painful process for your four-legged friend, but these problems can be averted before they even start.

Dental Care at the Veterinary Practice

There are two critical components of your pet's veterinary dental care: oral examinations and dental cleanings. Veterinary dental care begins at the puppy and kitten life stage. AAHA recommends that veterinarians evaluate puppies and kittens for problems related to the deciduous (baby) teeth, missing or extra teeth, swellings and oral development. As your pet ages, your veterinarian will look for developmental anomalies, the accumulation of plaque and tartar, periodontal disease and oral tumors.

Veterinarians can perform a basic oral examination on patients that are awake. However, a short-lasting anesthetic is required in order to provide a complete and thorough examination as well as dental cleanings.

The AAHA Dental Care Guidelines recommend regular oral examinations and dental cleanings, under general anesthesia, for all adult dogs and cats. AAHA recommends these procedures at least annually starting at one year of age for cats and small-breed dogs, and at two years of age for large-breed dogs.

The guidelines further recommend the following:

Pre-anesthetic exam — Whenever anesthesia is needed, special considerations are taken to help ensure the safety of your pet. Your veterinarian will thoroughly examine your pet to make sure she's healthy enough to undergo anesthesia. Depending on your pet's age and general physical condition, your veterinarian may also run blood, urine, electrocardiograph, and x-ray tests to check for any dangerous heart, kidney, or other conditions. Though there is some risk associated with any medical procedure, modern anesthesia is usually safe, even for older pets.

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Anesthesia monitoring — During anesthesia, the monitoring and recording of your pet's vital signs (such as body temperature, heart rate, and respiration, as well as other important factors) is important. This helps ensure the safety of your pet while undergoing anesthesia.

Scaling & Polishing — Veterinarians are advised to use similar instruments as human dentists to remove plaque and calculus from your pet's teeth. To smooth out any scratches in the tooth enamel, polishing with a special paste is also recommended.

Fluoride/sealants — The application of an anti-plaque substance, such as a fluoride treatment and/or a barrier sealant is also advised. This can help strengthen and desensitize teeth as well as decrease future plaque.

Home Dental Care

Your pet's dental care doesn't rest with your veterinarian alone. As a pet owner, you play a pivotal role in helping ensure your pet's dental health through regular teeth brushing. For more information on getting started, read our teeth brushing article.

Remember... pets can live longer, healthier lives if oral health care is managed and maintained throughout their lives. In fact, proper dental care may add as much as five years to your pet's life! Talk to your veterinarian about developing a dental care plan for your furry friend.

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