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Improving At-Home Dental Care for Pets

Periodontal disease, or gum disease, is a common condition in dogs and cats, affecting 80% to 90% of dogs >3 years of age and 70% to 80% of cats over their lifetime.^{1,2} Periodontal disease begins when plaque forms on the teeth, triggering inflammation and infection in the tissue surrounding the teeth. It can have significant impacts on your pet's health and often goes undiagnosed and untreated until it reaches an advanced stage, by which time pets may be experiencing significant pain and discomfort. In addition to oral pain, discomfort, and infection, periodontal disease has been linked to an animal's overall health, with potential impacts on the heart, liver, and kidneys.³⁻⁵

Comprehensive dental examinations and professional cleanings performed under anesthesia remain the gold standard for assessing and managing periodontal disease. However, consistent at-home oral care plays a key role in maintaining good oral health. The following tips can help support oral health at home between veterinary visits.

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Tip #1: Brush Your Pet's Teeth ≥ 3 Times Per Week

Brushing your pet's teeth with a pet-safe toothbrush and toothpaste is the most effective way to limit plaque buildup between professional veterinary cleanings. Ideally, a pet's teeth should be brushed once a day. If daily brushing isn't feasible, brushing every other day is recommended, as irregular brushing provides minimal benefit in controlling plaque and tartar.

Many pets may initially resist toothbrushing, which can make establishing a routine challenging. Introducing toothbrushing gradually by allowing pets to become accustomed to the taste of toothpaste and the feel of the toothbrush can help ease this transition. Short, positive sessions and consistent practice are often effective, and over time, many pets learn to tolerate or even enjoy the process. Positive reinforcement such as with praise or treats can also help make toothbrushing a stress-free part of daily care.

Tip #2: Avoid Hard Chews or Toys That Can Fracture Teeth

Although some toys and chews can help support dental health, toys and chews that are too hard can break your pet's teeth. When a tooth is fractured, the tooth's nerves and inner chamber (pulp) can be exposed, leading to pain and potential infection. These teeth must be removed surgically or undergo tooth-sparing techniques like root canals.

Products that are often too hard include animal bones, antlers, hooves, yak cheese chews, nylon toys, and plastic toys. The abrasive texture of tennis balls can also wear down tooth enamel over time, so these should be used with caution. Appropriate chew toys should have some flexibility or you should be able to indent the surface of the product with your fingernail.

Tip #3: Support Oral Health With Dental Care Aids

- **Dental chews or treats:** These physically remove plaque and tartar by rubbing against the surface of the teeth and gums. Some products contain enzymes or other ingredients to enhance the removal of plaque while freshening breath.
- **Dental gels or sprays:** Useful for pets that do not tolerate regular toothbrushing, these products contain enzymes and other agents that help reduce plaque and tartar.
- **Dental wipes:** Most helpful for pets with smaller mouths or those resistant to toothbrushing, dental wipes are usually wrapped around the owner's finger, then rubbed along the outer surfaces of the pet's teeth to help remove plaque and tartar.
- **Water additives:** Added to drinking water, these solutions can help control plaque and tackle bad breath. Water additives should be used in addition to toothbrushing for the greatest benefit.
- **Therapeutic dental diets:** Specially formulated diets can help reduce plaque and tartar accumulation through kibble texture or added agents. These diets are particularly helpful for cats, who may be the most resistant to toothbrushing.

Tip #4: Choose Dental Products That Carry the VOHC Seal of Acceptance

The Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) reviews products to see if they meet their standards of effective plaque and tartar control. Effective products are awarded the VOHC Seal of Acceptance.⁶ Products with the VOHC Seal of Acceptance may include toothbrushes, tooth wipes, toothpaste, water additives,

oral gel sprays, edible treats and chews, dental diets, and professional teeth sealants. Regular use of products with the VOHC Seal can help reduce the severity of periodontal disease in dogs and cats. Pet owners are encouraged to choose at-home dental care products that display the VOHC seal.

Tip #5: Know the Signs of Dental Disease & Oral Pain

Pets with oral health issues may show signs such as bad breath, discolored or broken teeth, tartar buildup, red or bleeding gums, excessive drooling, difficulty eating and/or dropping food, and swelling, sores, or masses in the mouth or on the muzzle or chin.

It is important to note that many pets with periodontal disease or other oral issues may not show any signs of disease, highlighting the importance of routine veterinary examinations. When symptoms are present, at-home dental care alone is unlikely to reverse or treat the problem and a veterinary evaluation should be scheduled.

Conclusion

At-home dental care can prevent or slow the development of significant dental disease and the need for extensive (and expensive) dental interventions. Pets should see their veterinarians for regular dental examinations during their wellness appointments, and professional dental cleanings are still recommended to maintain a healthy mouth.

With proper veterinary and at-home dental care, you can protect your pet's teeth and prevent pain. Speak with your veterinarian about at-home dental care for your pet to get individualized recommendations.

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