

Frequently Asked Questions about Your Dog or Cat's Oral Health

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Dental disease is the single most common problem found during routine physical exam. Here are answers to some questions about how to keep your dog or cat's oral health in check.

What's the big deal about oral health?

Dental disease is found more often than ANY OTHER DISEASE on routine physical exam. Periodontal disease is disease of the gums and bone supporting the teeth and is caused by plaque bacteria. In humans, periodontal disease has been linked to cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis, stroke and low birth-weight in babies. There are few studies in dogs and cats about the link between periodontal disease and other diseases, but the studies that exist suggest that there is a similar association in pets. Keeping your pet's mouth free of plaque bacteria will improve their quality of life and possibly even prolong their life.

How can I keep my pet's mouth healthy?

The most important thing you can do to keep your dog or cat's mouth free of dental disease is to have regular physical examinations by your veterinarian and cleanings under anesthesia. Daily tooth brushing is also important and can prolong the time your pet can go between professional cleanings. Plaque bacteria begins accumulating on teeth immediately after tooth brushing or a cleaning. Plaque bacteria can easily be brushed away. After about 36 hours, however, the plaque begins to mineralize and forms tartar. This cannot be brushed away and will continue to accumulate until it is removed with a professional scaling under anesthesia. Daily brushing will remove most of the plaque before it can mineralize and form tartar.

How do I get my pet to let me brush their teeth?

Getting your dog or cat to accept the toothbrush is just like teaching any new behavior. Invest in a toothbrush designed specifically for your dog or your cat. Use pet toothpaste; NEVER use human toothpaste, because it contains fluoride which is toxic over time if swallowed. Start out slowly and give your dog or cat lots of praise and treats for every success. Your veterinarian or veterinary dentist can give you tips and a tooth-brushing lesson at your next visit.

Won't bones keep my pet's teeth clean?

No! Bones, antlers, cow hooves and nylon bones, among other treats, are too hard and break teeth. Rubber chew toys, compressed rawhide and other softer treats are safe for teeth. If you can't bend the product or dent it with your fingernail, the treat is too hard and can break teeth.

What dental products work best?

There are hundreds of products available that claim to help promote dental health. Most have not undergone any kind of testing to determine their safety or efficacy. The Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) maintains a list of products that have been shown through clinical trials to reduce plaque or tartar on teeth. The list can be found at www.vohc.org.