

Pet Dental Health Month

Of all dogs 2 years old or more, 80% have some form of dental disease, and veterinarians say that periodontal disease is the number one diagnosed condition in pets today.

When Marlene King's two dogs fought over a bone one night, she had to rush her eldest pet, 14-year-old cocker spaniel "Toby" to the veterinary emergency hospital. She knew that Toby would have to have a few stitches for the bite wounds on his face, but she was shocked when the emergency veterinarian was more concerned about the severity of Toby's dental disease.

"The veterinarian was much more worried about the infection in Toby's mouth. One of his big canine teeth had been knocked out in the fight and if we didn't do gum surgery to repair the hole, he would always have severe sinus infections. Because Toby's gum disease was so advanced, the doctor was worried about the chances of the surgery healing. I never knew that dental care was that important."

Dental care of dogs and cats is one of the most commonly overlooked areas of pet health care. Approximately 80% of all dogs and cats have periodontal disease by the time they are only two years old. Dental disease affects much more than fresh breath. It frequently leads to more serious health problems such as liver, kidney and heart disease. That's why more veterinarians are not just treating dental disease, but taking new steps to prevent it. A major step in this process is encouraging owners to participate in their pet's oral health at home.

Periodontal disease in pets is the same as it is in people. It's a sneaky and insidious process that begins when bacteria in the mouth attach to the teeth and produce a film called "plaque". When the bacteria die, they are calcified into "calculus" commonly known as tartar which makes a rough surface for even more bacteria to stick to. In the beginning, plaque is soft and can easily be removed by brushing or chewing on appropriate toys or treats. But if left to spread, plaque leads to gum inflammation (called "gingivitis") and infection. Eventually, the infection spreads to the tooth root and even the jaw bone itself – causing pain and tooth loss.

The American Animal Hospital Association recently devised new guidelines for veterinarians in order to highlight the need for more professional oral hygiene care for pets. The organization stressed the necessity of going beyond the traditional "scraping the surface" of routine dental cleanings, known as "prophies". Veterinarians are encouraged to teach owners the importance of good oral hygiene when puppies and

kittens are only a few months old in order to begin a lifetime of healthy benefits that go far beyond sweet smelling kisses.

Dr. Johnathon R. Dodd, DVM, DAVDC, of the Animal Dental Clinic in Austin, Texas is a big proponent of dental health awareness and says, "The bottom line is that periodontal disease is extremely aggressive...it is a disease of neglect."

Unfortunately, good oral health care hasn't been an important part of the veterinary school curriculum until recent years. Many veterinarians simply were not taught the serious health consequences of untreated dental disease. But research proves that unchecked dental disease can be the root of other problems. Seminars and workshops at the Western Veterinary Conference, the largest educational conference for veterinarians, are filled to capacity by veterinarians learning good preventative dentistry and oral surgery.

Marlene King was fortunate that Toby's emergency doctor had a special interest in veterinary dentistry, and had learned new dental procedures at a recent conference. "Toby had x-rays of his mouth and we found out that he actually had several abscessed teeth which the vet removed. Toby had been eating more slowly for several months and I thought it was just a part of old age. Now I know that he was probably in pain every time he ate."

A recent roundtable discussion between veterinary dental experts shed even more light on the impact that good preventative dentistry plays in a pet's life. They strongly recommend daily dental care for pets and twice yearly mouth exams beginning when puppies and kittens are two months old. And while that schedule may seem too complicated for some pet owners, dental specialists, veterinary supply companies have developed products that will help pet busy owners put some bite into home dental care for their pets.

A recent development that goes beyond good veterinary and at-home care, is the actual prevention of plaque using a barrier sealant gel. This is applied by the veterinarian and continued at home by the pet owner. Called OraVet^{AE}, this system is the first method used by veterinarians to create a physical barrier that reduces bacterial plaque adhesion above and under the gum lines. It is applied at home only once a week after the initial hospital application.

Marlene has learned how to easily clean Toby's mouth on a regular basis in order to keep him healthy and to prevent his mouth from getting infected again. She began using the new plaque prevention system. "It's not that

expensive, it's easy to do, and Toby likes the attention. And he gets special treats that actually help clean his teeth as well.”

It's important for all pet owners to know that pets can lead longer and healthier lives with good dental care. In fact, studies show that proper dental care can extend a pet's life by as much as five years! Ask your veterinarian about good dental care for your special furry friend.

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Dr. Tony Kremer owns 5 veterinary hospitals in the Chicagoland area and is the founder of Help Save Pets, an animal shelter that found homes for over 1000 pets in 2008. † He is also a member of the Chicago Veterinary Medical Association Public Education Committee and appears monthly on NBC 5 Chicago as well as FOX Chicago and ABC 7 News. †For More Information check out DrTony.com