

Dental Home Care

Dental care does not end with the prophylaxis. Within 24 hours, plaque has already started to form on the teeth, and the periodontal disease process starts over. This is where home care comes in. Imagine what would happen in you mouth if you never brushed your teeth, all the cleanings in the world won't keep your mouth healthy.

Dental disease is the number one diagnosed disease in our patients, more than skin allergies, ear problems, lameness, etc. In animals over 6 years of age it is even more common. You may say, "I've had pets all my life, and no one has told me about this before." There are a few reasons for that. First, our pets, like us, are living longer, which allows the bacteria in the plaque to work longer, and cause more disease. Second, many purebred dogs and cats are predisposed to dental disease. Finally, in the not too distant past, we as veterinarians did not know that this caused a problem in our patients. For these reasons, you likely did not appreciate the importance of oral health in our animal friends.

The "Gold Standard" of home care is tooth brushing. This is the most effective means of controlling plaque and the associated diseases that affect both our patients as well as ourselves. The following is a guide to starting to brush your pet's teeth.

START YOUNG

The sooner you start your pet on its oral health care, the easier it will be to do. We recommend that all pet's have their mouths handled from a young age (as young as possible) to get them used to it. You can start brushing their teeth as young as 2-3 months of age, but it really isn't necessary until they are about 5 months. This is when they have most of their adult teeth in.

GO SLOW

Don't push the procedure on your pet. Make the experience as positive as possible. If you force this on your pet, they will resent it, and the brushing will probably not happen. Start with simply handling the mouth for a short period. Then get your fingers in the mouth, and even try to open it. Then start by wiping the outside surface of the teeth with a soft cloth wrapped around your finger. Finally, introduce the brush. These steps may take weeks to accomplish, but it WILL be worth it. Start with a few teeth, and then slowly progress to the entire mouth as your pet gets more comfortable and allows you to brush without much resistance.

MAKE IT FUN

If you link this behavior to positive things like walks, playtime, and especially FOOD (either dinner or a favorite treat), you will greatly increase the likelihood of patient acceptance. This will take a while, but again, it WILL be worth it.

TOOLS

All you need to get started is a toothbrush. There are various brushes designed for pets. Buy one appropriately sized for your pet's mouth. If you prefer, a soft child's toothbrush will also work well. There are many options for toothpaste. You CANNOT use a human toothpaste, because they contain ingredients that can make your pet sick if swallowed (and it will be swallowed). There are numerous veterinary products available, and they come in various flavors such as chicken, seafood and beef.

TECHNIQUES

Use a circular motion with the brush at a 45 degree angle to the gum line. Use a small amount of veterinary toothpaste, but replace it often. Brush all of your pet's teeth in succession. For the rear teeth, you can usually just place the brush in under the lips. The rear lower teeth present a small problem since the upper teeth cover them. If your pet is very good, you can try to open his or her mouth slightly (1/2" or so) by placing a finger between the jaws in the area just behind the upper canine. There are only a few very small teeth in this area. The insides of the teeth are a little bit more tricky. Most patients

will not accept brushing this area. Try to open the mouth slightly and brush the inside of the teeth. If you can't do it, it's ok, as most periodontal disease occurs on the outside surface of the teeth. One exception to this is on the inside surface of the upper canines in small breed dogs (especially dachshunds, Yorkshire terriers, Maltese, and poodles. They can get very bad periodontal disease in this area for some reason.

FREQUENCY

Once a day would be ideal, but for most owners this is unrealistic. It has been reported that if you brush your pet's teeth 3 times a week you will reduce plaque by 90%, and if you can only manage once a week by 75%. We ask most clients to try for three days a week, unless we are treating periodontal disease.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Just like you, even though brushing greatly improves periodontal health, it does not completely eliminate the need for professional cleanings. However, it should decrease the frequency necessary to maintain oral health. When you brush your pet's teeth, you can catch potential problems early. If you start seeing blood on the toothbrush, this means that there is some periodontal disease starting, and your pet is due for a cleaning. If you start seeing tan/brown buildup on the teeth, this is calculus, and again your pet is likely due for a cleaning. If you notice any loose teeth, swellings or growths, broken teeth, or anything else that you don't like, it is time to visit your veterinarian for an evaluation. In addition, if a pet who is normally tolerant of brushing stops allowing it, it may be a sign of oral pain, and you should see your veterinarian for an evaluation. Regardless, an oral exam should be part of an annual physical exam performed regularly by your veterinarian.

OTHER OPTIONS

If your pet just won't allow the brushing, or if you don't have time, there are some other methods. There are special foods available that will help clean the teeth. Hills T/D is a food available through veterinarians. It comes in a cat form, as well as 2 sizes for dogs. This is balanced enough to be the sole food for your pet (as long as your pet has no other healthy problems that require a special diet, please consult your veterinarian). It can also be used as part of the pet's food, or even as a treat. In addition, there are various tartar control chews and biscuits that have varying levels of effectiveness. Avoid hard treats such as real bones and hooves which can break teeth.

DENTAL SEALANTS

Oravet Gel is a plaque prevention barrier that is first applied as the last step of a professional cleaning. The gel provides a barrier film on the teeth which prevents plaque from building up on the teeth. At home, the product is easily applied once weekly to maintain this barrier. For a video demonstration of how to use the gel visit the company's web site at www.oravet.us.merial.com.