

## Dental Disease

We are all aware of the importance of our own dental care. We brush our teeth daily, floss and visit our dentist regularly for professional cleanings. Despite this awareness of human dentistry, many pet owners still do not realize that their pets can develop the same dental problems. What's worse is that pets suffer the same amount of pain when these dental problems arise. Bad breath is more than just a nuisance. It's an indication that your pet's teeth need attention.

**Why is it important to care for your pet's teeth?** The reasons are the same as for yourself. As plaque builds up on the teeth, the gums become inflamed. Over time this inflammation leads to a deeper infection along the teeth resulting in periodontitis. With periodontal (gum disease) the bone around the teeth recedes leading to loose, painful teeth and eventually tooth loss.

This infection can also lead to more serious systemic health concerns. When your pet eats, these inflamed gums bleed and the infection gains access to the bloodstream. Periodontal disease has been linked to certain forms of *heart*, *kidney*, and *liver* problems.

Dental disease is also very *painful*. Anyone who has ever suffered from a broken or abscessed tooth can testify to this. Studies have shown that our pets feel pain in much the same way we do. They simply have evolved to hide it better. They are not pain free with dental disease; they are simply suffering in silence.

**Why is it so expensive to have my pet's teeth cleaned?** Safe and effective dental cleaning requires general anesthesia. This adds considerably to the expense. All of our dental patients are placed on IV fluids, blood pressure monitors, and the safest anesthetic drugs are used. They are always under the direct care of both a doctor and a veterinary nurse. While these services add to the cost, they decrease the likelihood of complications. If you are shopping around for dental services, you may find cheaper care elsewhere, but you must first ask yourself is it safer?

**Why is there such a range on my estimate?** The majority of dental disease is completely hidden in an awake pet. Often what is visible is only one of many problems. Once the patient is under anesthesia we can probe, explore, and take x-rays of the teeth. Sometimes we

find many more problems than we expected, other times it is the exact opposite. Because we don't know what we will find, we cannot accurately estimate what treatment will be indicated. The range on our estimates reflects this. We encourage pet owners to make themselves available via a phone during their pet's dental procedure. This way we can keep you apprised of our findings, give you a more accurate estimate and obtain consent to proceed. If necessary, some problems can be addressed in more than one visit to help disperse the cost.

**Why do you need X-rays?** The crown of the tooth is just the "tip of the iceberg." Often, the most serious dental problems happen below the gum-line. Studies have shown that approximately 50% of dental problems are missed if dental x-rays are not performed. Looking below the gum-line allows the mouth to be fully evaluated. Without this important step, your pet may have pretty white teeth and gums that are still badly infected.

**What about anesthesia-free teeth cleaning services?** You may have heard of anesthesia-free teeth cleaning offered by pet stores or grooming facilities. In an awake pet it is impossible to clean below the gum-line. As a result, these "cleanings" are simply cosmetic and of no medical benefit to your pet. What is worse is that these "cleanings" are not always safe for your pet. They are often performed by personnel with no veterinary training, and are therefore illegal and in violation of the Veterinary Practice Act of the State of California.

**My pet eats fine and acts normal, why does he/she need treatment?** It is not surprising that your pet does not exhibit signs of pain. In the wild showing pain is a sign of weakness, and weak animals simply do not survive. Also, if a wild animal allows dental pain to keep them from eating, they will soon grow weak and starve. So, instead, pets tend to learn to put up with pain. *Studies have shown that dogs and cats have pain thresholds and tolerances almost identical to humans.* This means that if something hurts you, it would hurt your pet to the same degree and in the same way. It is not uncommon for a pet owner to report that their pet is suddenly much happier and playful after a major dental procedure than they had been in years.