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Pet Dental Care

Why all the fuss?

When I bring up dental care with my clients, more often than not the response is “I did not know dental care was important.” In fact, Dental Disease is the most common disease seen in cats and dogs at **70-80%** topping obesity and ear infections. It is also serious. Yes, we all know that dental disease causes bad breath, tooth loss and dental pain. And while those are reason enough to look after your pet’s teeth, dental disease is a common cause of heart, kidney and liver failure. The same bacteria that causes “dog breath” is leaking into the blood systems and travelling to vital organs and setting up chronic and destructive infections. The same is true for people. The top three things you can do to ensure a long & healthy life for your pets is:

1. A good quality diet (including not overfeeding)
2. Regular physical exams and preventative care
3. Good dental care

OK, so it’s important! So how do I get my pet started?

With the growth of knowledge about how serious this disease is has come an explosion of the number of products claiming to help your pet’s teeth. First look for the VOHC label. That is like the American Dental Association label on *your* tooth paste. It says that a board of independent veterinary dentists has research this product and found it effective. Next step – what works best? Like most options in life, the easier something is the less effective it is – take liquid shoe polish for example. And what is practical for you and your pet? If you **and** your pet can not or will not do some form of dental care, all the products in the world won’t help.

How often do I need to care for my pets teeth?

Plaque forms in 48 hours. Plaque is an invisible film of bacteria that forms on the teeth daily . Plaque leads to tartar which leads to gum (periodontal) disease. Once tartar forms it takes a professional dentistry under anesthesia to remove it. So the answer is you need to do something for your pets teeth every to every other day.

A word about groomers brushing teeth: A fine idea! – I am sure they do a good job, but brushing less than once a week is of little value.

The Options: From most effective to least

1. The professional dental cleaning

For many pets, this is the place to start. It gets the teeth back to their kitten or puppy white and allows you to do the follow-up home care to keep them that way as long as possible. Under anesthesia is the only way to safely and completely examine and treat a pet's dental disease. But I always recommend starting dental care at home before the dentistry because a professional dentistry is of little value if there will not be appropriate home care afterwards. A recent study found that 85% of dogs that had a dental needed another one within 18 months when they had no follow-up care at home.

2. How to brush

Another not so surprising study finding proved that tooth brushes are the best way to clean teeth! The key to brushing a pet's teeth is to start slowly – training your pet to accept, even like the process – just like any “pet trick”. The biggest reason owners stop brushing their pets teeth is they started too quickly brushing all the teeth the first time as they would a child's teeth. Follow these simple steps for dental health success:

Step 1: Select a good quality VOHC approved pet toothpaste. They come in various palatable flavors. Let your pet smell the toothpaste a couple of times a day but do not let them lick it. If they lick – say no and walk away. If they do not lick, give them a small treat. Do this for one week – multiple times per day.

Step 2: Using your finger with a little dab of toothpaste on it rub one of the upper canine teeth with 5 strokes. (the big tooth up front). When finish give your pet a small treat. Do this multiple times of day the next week. Then If the pet licks say no and walk away.

Step 3: Repeat the above adding the other upper canine tooth for one week.

Step 4: Repeat above adding the back upper molars on one side for the next week and add the upper molars on the other side the following week.

If at any time the pet rejects your efforts go back and repeat the prior step until it accepted. For 90% of cats and dogs focusing on the upper canine teeth and the back molars is enough for life. Some dogs, particularly small dogs will develop tartar and periodontal disease in their front teeth (the incisors) and those would have to be brushed as well. The basic rule is brush where you see tartar or disease.

3. Other products we and the VOHC recommend

DH diet from Purina – A daily complete and balanced diet that provides teeth cleaning action with every meal thanks to a proprietary crosshatching of fibers as the teeth chew through it plus glucosamine and antioxidants to protect the middle aged to old pet.

HEXtra Chews – antibiotic impregnated beef rawhides that reduce pathological bacteria in the mouth as your pet chews on it.

Oral Hygiene Rinse – bathes the mouth in an antibacterial wash to prevent plaque build up.

Greenies for cats & dogs – safely digestible dental chews that clean teeth with the helpful action of chlorophyll. One of the few treats to have the VOHC seal of approval.