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Buy Your Pet a Toothbrush

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When I was a child, brushing my teeth was my least favorite part of the nightly routine. Of course I eventually learned the value of tooth-brushing, and now as a pet owner, I've discovered that taking care of my pet's teeth is just as important.

"Periodontal disease is the most common disease in both veterinary and human medicine. It is also one of the easiest to prevent. More than 80 percent of all animals over 2 years of age have some sort of dental disease that needs to be treated," says Dr. Keith Stein, a resident in veterinary dentistry at the University of Illinois Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Urbana, one of only five U.S. institutions offering a residency in veterinary dentistry.

Home dental care is the first line of defense against periodontal disease in dogs and cats, and the biggest weapon is the toothbrush. The mechanical action of the toothbrush removes plaque. Ideally, brushing should be done daily, but a minimum of 3 to 5 times weekly is recommended. It is easy to do and usually requires no more than 30 seconds to complete.

Use a veterinary-approved toothpaste, not a human toothpaste. Dogs and cats can't spit out the foam from Crest and Colgate. They swallow the foam, which leads to irritation of the gastrointestinal tract and problems for the pet owner.

"Make brushing your pet's teeth a positive experience. Start early with your puppy or new dog, getting him used to having his mouth handled. A lot of dogs enjoy having their teeth brushed. They love the attention and the taste of the toothpaste!" says Dr. Stein.

The first step in the process is to have your pet get used to having you handle him around his mouth. Next lift your pet's lips. When first touching the mouth, put a taste treat on your finger to make the experience positive for your pet. Once your pet is comfortable with this, begin rubbing the gums.

Your pet's toothbrush should be soft bristled. Gradually increase the time you spend playing with the mouth. Flavored toothpaste is available at most vet clinics.

Adult teeth erupt when the puppy is between 4 and 7 months of age. When working with your puppy, the goal is to get him accustomed to having his teeth brushed.

Some pets are just difficult and won't allow owners to brush their teeth. "Other than tooth brushing, several approaches are available which may help prevent dental disease. These include gels and rinses that are rubbed on the gums and treats, rawhides, and diets formulated to help reduce plaque. Ideally these should be used along with—not instead of—brushing your dog's teeth," advises Dr. Stein.

When buying any dental care product, look on the package for the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) seal. These products have proven effectiveness in the mouth.

The goal of home dental care is to slow plaque formation. If plaque is not removed, it stays on the tooth and mineralizes, forming the brown stuff on your pet's teeth, which is called tartar. Plaque and tartar are composed mostly of bacteria, which means it is actually an infection. Periodontal disease can cause negative effects throughout the body. It also makes pre-existing diseases worse. Lessening the amount of bacteria decreases infection in the mouth. Pets that receive home dental care are less likely to need to have teeth extracted as they age.

"In addition to providing home care, you should have your animal's teeth examined every 6 months by a veterinarian. A 6-month span is equivalent to several years in a person's life, and a lot can happen in that time. Professional veterinary dental cleaning is necessary as often as twice a year or as infrequently as once every 3 years, depending on the animal and the amount of home dental care that is given," comments Dr. Stein.

Home dental care is recommended for both cats and dogs to reduce infection and dental pain. It adds to your pet's quality of life and overall tail-wagging happiness. Contact the dental clinic at the University of Illinois Veterinary Teaching Hospital at 217-333-5859 or your local veterinarian for more information about proper dental care.

Source: Dr. Keith Stein

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