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DENTAL CARE

PETS NEED DENTAL CARE, TOO!

Have you brushed? No, not your teeth - your dogs. Dogs need regular dental care just as you do.

Gum disease and broken teeth are the major concerns for animals' teeth. Fortunately, dogs seldom suffer from tooth decay. The cone shape of their teeth, non-acidic saliva, and low-carbohydrate diets all help protect them from this nasty ailment (NOTE: if you give your pets sweets for snacks, they CAN get cavities).

Regular brushing and professional cleaning can keep your dog's teeth healthy and gleaming. Give pets appropriate toys to chew will help prevent fractures.

DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

So your pet has bad teeth. What's the big deal?

Periodontal disease, which affects the gums, bones, and connective tissue around the teeth, can cause tooth loss. First, plaque - a soft clear or cream-colored deposit - forms on the teeth. If it isn't removed, minerals in the animal's saliva turn plaque into tartar. Tartar builds up below the gums and bacteria grow, causing inflammation.

The same bacteria which cause the inflammation can enter your pet's bloodstream and cause or aggravate lung, kidney, liver and heart problems - a lot of trouble from something that could be stopped in its early stages.

START CARE YOUNG!

When your puppy first begins to get permanent teeth (about 6 months of age), check carefully to be sure the "baby" or "milk" teeth come out as the new teeth come in. Retained "baby" teeth can cause the permanent teeth to be crooked. Small breeds with their tiny jaws are at special risk for this problem.

While hard foods and chew toys can help keep teeth clean, you need to get your pet accustomed to regular tooth brushing. As soon as you bring your new pet home, get it accustomed to having its mouth handled. This is a good practice for dogs that will be shown since judges check to be sure the dog has its full set of teeth. It is also good training because it teaches the dog to tolerate having things in its mouth without biting or snapping.

FEEDING RIGHT.

What you feed your pet affects its dental health. Dry foods and treats help clean plaque from the teeth. Rawhide chews are also good cleaning tools, as are a number of knobby plastic toys on the market. None of these are hard enough to cause tooth damage, but you need to watch your pet to be sure small pieces of the toy's aren't torn off and swallowed. Real bones can also be dangerous for your pet and **SHOULD NOT** be used for teeth cleaning purposes.

TEACHING YOUR PET TO ACCEPT BRUSHING.

You can train your pet to accept regular brushing. Begin by running your finger gently over the dog's gums. At first, just rub the outside, but as your pet adjusts to the routine, begin to open his mouth and rub the gums inside the teeth as well.

As your pet gets accustomed to this, wrap your finger with gauze and rub his gums. Eventually add a toothpaste designed for pets - **DO NOT USE HUMAN TOOTHPASTE!** By the time you do this for a few weeks, your pet should be willing to accept a toothbrush for pets, which should have soft, multi-ruffed synthetic bristles.

Hold the toothbrush at a 45 degree angle and apply it to the area where teeth and gums meet. Rotate it in small circles, overlapping several teeth. Finish with vertical strokes to pull plaque from between the teeth. Repeat this process until all the teeth on the cheek side are clean. The inside teeth will be more difficult, as your pet may resist opening his mouth, but eventually you will be able to brush your pet's teeth a couple of times a week.

WHEN YOUR PET NEEDS PROFESSIONAL HELP.

If your pet won't cooperate with home brushing or if you already see brown tartar stains on his teeth or red and bleeding gums, it's time to turn to your veterinarian for help. He or she will give your pet general anesthesia and clean the teeth above and below the gum line to remove plaque and tartar. After the teeth are cleaned, they will be polished to remove microscopic plaque and to make the teeth smooth to discourage plaque from clinging.

Remember, dental care is as important to your pet's health as it is to your own. You owe it to your pet to provide regular tooth care and cleaning.