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D E N T A L D I S E A S E

Most people are very aware of their own teeth. We are subject to a constant barrage of information regarding plaque control, cavity prevention, and the catastrophic effects of bad breath. Many of us also visit our own dentists regularly. Despite this awareness of human dentistry, many pet owners still do not realize that their pets are subject to the same dental concerns.

Why is it important to care for your pet's teeth? For exactly the same reasons it is important to care for your own. The most common disease in pet animals is periodontal (gum) disease. It affects at least 90% of dogs and 70% of cats over the age of 5 years. Periodontal disease is the result of bacterial infection of the structures that support the teeth. As it progresses, these structures weaken, leading to loose and lost teeth. While this is going on, the animal is fighting a constant battle with the bacteria in the mouth. As the animal chews its food, the infected and inflamed gums bleed, and a shower of very aggressive bacteria enters the blood stream. These germs are carried throughout the body and can cause infection in many areas.

Among the diseases that have been documented as associated with periodontal disease are kidney infection and failure, liver infection and failure, heart valve infection and failure and arthritis. With the immune system constantly challenged by oral bacteria, it is less able to respond to other invasions. Mouths with advanced periodontal disease are sore so animals do not chew their food as well and may have a hard time digesting it properly so can

suffer from malnutrition. The overall effect is that the quality and quantity of life suffer dramatically.

What can you do about dental disease?

Plenty. The first step is to look in your pet's mouth. If the gums appear red or inflamed, if there is a foul odour, if you see pus at the gum line or if you see loose or broken teeth, arrange to have your veterinarian do an oral examination as soon as possible. The problem will be assessed and a treatment plan formulated. This will usually involve a professional cleaning and polishing of the teeth and may include extraction of unsalvageable teeth. Once the teeth are clean you will be instructed in home-care. As with your own teeth, plaque and tartar will start to accumulate very rapidly unless you brush regularly.

If you have a young pet and you and your veterinarian can find no signs of dental disease then you can start home-care right away, to prevent severe problems from developing. It is suggested that you start training your pet to accept having its mouth played with as soon as you bring it home. There is no need to brush kitten and puppy teeth, as they will be lost and replaced in the first year, but if you can get them to enjoy having their teeth brushed when they are young, it will make it much easier to carry out your home-care program when the permanent teeth come in. It is suggested, however, that when your pet is teething, (losing baby teeth in favor of permanent teeth) that the gums will be sore and so it would be best not to be playing around with the mouth at that time.

When you brush your pet's teeth, you can not ask them to rinse and spit. Therefore, it is important that you use a brushing agent that is safe to swallow. Do not use human tooth paste as it will foam and distress your pet and when swallowed, it can cause stomach upset. Baking soda is also to be avoided, as the very high sodium content can be dangerous, especially to older patients. There are now several products specifically formulated for use on dog and cat teeth.

There are, of course, many other oral and dental diseases that do occur and require treatment. Dogs and cats are very prone to fractured and traumatically injured teeth leading to tooth root (endodontic) abscesses. As well as being constant sources of infection, these teeth are painful.

With many pure bred animals, selective breeding has resulted in orthodontic problems. This can lead to teeth hitting each other in abnormal and painful ways. These conditions are best treated in the young animal, and some can even be prevented by early intervention.

Cats are prone to a cavity-type of problem that starts at or below the gum line, making it difficult to detect until it is well advanced. These 'Neck Lesions', as they are called, are extremely painful. Fully anesthetized cats show no pain response with an abdominal incision but will react when a neck lesion is probed.

Many owners will say that their pet does not exhibit signs of pain, even when there is an obvious problem. This is not surprising when we think about how dogs and cats act in the wild. As predators, they will often select a weak or distressed animal as an easy meal. If they reveal to the world that they are in pain, or ill, they stand a good chance of being eaten themselves. Also, if they allow dental pain to keep them from eating, they soon grow too weak to hunt and then starve. So, instead, they tend to put up with the pain and carry on.

Studies have shown that dogs and cats have pain thresholds and tolerances almost identical to human subjects. This means that if

something hurts you, it would hurt your pet to the same degree and in the same way. If you have every had a tooth ache, you know the meaning of pain.

As veterinary dentists catch up to their human counter parts, more treatment options become available. No longer must we extract all diseased teeth, as many reparative and restorative procedures are now available. Some veterinarians will be able to provide these services in their own hospitals. For those veterinarians who choose not to make the large investment in time and money to equip themselves to offer advanced dental services, referral options are available.

Dogs and cats feel dental pain
in the same way and
to the same degree as we do.

One final point, dogs and, cats, use their mouths for many of the same essential and recreational functions that we use our hands. It follows that their teeth are as important to them as our fingers are to us. A pet with a sore mouth and missing teeth faces both physical and emotional challenges.

Fortunately, with an increasing emphasis on preventative medicine, veterinary dentistry is starting to get the attention it deserves. The keys to a healthy mouth and a happier pet are, be aware of what problems can arise, watch for them, take steps to prevent them and treat them as soon as they are noticed.