



SHOW US YOUR SMILE

Hands down, the most common disease we see in our seemingly healthy patients on routine annual physical exams is . . .dental disease. We know, not very glamorous or exciting, but a real problem none the less. In fact by the age of 3, 70% of cats and 80% of dogs already have some sign of dental disease. If you lift your companion's lips and examine their teeth (careful they are sharp) you are likely to see yellow and brown thick crusts layered on the tooth surface. That's plaque that has mineralized into tarter or calculus. All that plaque and tarter in your beloved companion's mouth harbors millions of bacteria that shower their liver, kidneys and heart, putting them at risk of serious systemic illness. Accumulating plaque and tarter contribute to gingivitis and oral bone loss which lead to tooth loss and deep infection—all of which can cause significant pain—not to mention horrific “doggy breath”.

Lifting up a dog or cats lips to evaluate their mouths for dental disease is easier said than done. Not all of our patients are very appreciative of our efforts to examine their mouths. Even in cooperative patients a full exam can be very tricky because many dental lesions occur under the gum line or the back of the mouth. Because we can't ask out patients to “open just a little wider” or “rinse and spit”, their comprehensive oral exams and dental procedures require general anesthesia. While under general anesthesia we can probe for pockets, take x-rays, clean teeth and when indicated perform extractions and oral surgery.

As with most aspects of veterinary medicine, dogs and cats differ in the type of disease that we see and the treatments that they require. “Cats are not small dogs” as we like to say in the biz. Large dogs especially are at risk of breaking or fracturing their teeth while chewing hard objects. Fractures put them at risk for developing tooth root abscesses. When this occurs on the the large teeth in the back of their mouth (called the fourth upper premolar or carnasial tooth), the infection and inflammation causes pressure behind the eye making it excruciating for them to open their mouths. Small dogs tend to develop severe tarter and bone loss and often require multiple extractions to prevent bone infection. Brachiocephalic breeds (smushed faced breeds-like pugs) are at a huge disadvantage because they have severe crowding in their mouths which predisposes them to tarter build up and bone loss. Cats, on the other hand, develop a unique lesion called a “resorptive lesion”. These are similar to cavities but they destroy both the crown and root of the affected tooth and are very painful. Many cats come in to see us because of weight loss and reluctance to eat due to the pain caused by these lesions. X-rays are often necessary to determine the full extent of their disease. Affected teeth require extraction to remove the source of pain. We've had numerous clients report that their cat was turned back into a kitten when this source of pain was addressed. Although clients are often very concerned about how their companion will manage if multiple teeth are extracted we can attest that the patients are much happier and healthier after the diseased teeth are removed. Many patients will continue to eat crunchy diets even with multiple missing teeth.

So, of course, the question becomes. . .what can be done to prevent dental disease!!!? Routine dental cleanings and home care can significantly improve your pets oral hygiene and slow down the progression of dental disease. Brushing your companion's teeth everyday is certainly the gold standard of dental home care but we recognize how difficult it can be (don't

worry it is hard for us too!). Your veterinarian can provide you with an appropriate tooth brush and paste for your companion. The key to brushing is to start slowly. It is important that this is a positive experience for you and your companion so the first step is getting them used to having something in their mouth. Put a little bit of toothpaste on your finger and have your companion lick it off so they get a taste. Then try gently rubbing some on their gums or teeth to get them used to the motion. You can then move on to working the toothbrush (or even gauze) in a circular motion over the tooth, focusing on the gum line (this is where tarter builds up). The whole process should only take a minute or two. Most of the time your pet will probably be focused on licking the flavored toothpaste off! So here is the tricky part. Brushing needs to happen every other day in order to be effective. If you're only brushing a few times a month you get credit for trying but it is not going to prevent the calculus build up. But that's ok. There are other options.

For folks who cannot brush (and to be honest that's the vast majority of us) there are dental diets available that are specifically formulated to reduce tarter build up and remove calculus when your pet eats. Science Diet Oral Care or Hill's T/D (this must be purchased through a veterinarian) can be used in conjunction with your companion's normal diet, as a primary diet, or as a treat (4-5 pieces a day are ideal) in place of or in addition to regular brushing.

Finally, chew treats can be a great way for your companion to help prevent tarter build up in an enjoyable way. With any of these treats the most important part is that you are there to supervise! Many animals get so excited to chew on these yummy treats that they often can break off too large a piece which may be a choking hazard. Here is a list of chews treats that with supervision are okay:

Feline C.E.T. Chews for cats, Bimple Bones, Compressed Vegetable Treats (some colors may stain carpet so be careful), Greenies and Tarter Shield Chews. We **do not** recommend Marrow Bones, Hooves or any Pig Products (such as ears). Note that super hard chew toys may prevent tarter build up but they can also break teeth and cause the very fractures that we talked about above. Rawhide is also okay, but should be highly supervised. "Chewies can become swallowies"

Although maintaining your pets smile is a commitment there are significant rewards to be gained. Your pet will live a longer, healthier, more comfortable life. . .and their kisses will be so much sweeter.