



The Importance of Dental Health

Written by Shawn Messonnier, DVM and reprinted from Total Health Magazine:

Dogs don't get cavities, instead they get plaque buildup which leads to periodontal and gum disease.

Periodontal disease is the most common infectious (caused by bacteria) disease in dogs and cats. It is estimated that 80 percent or more of dogs and cats between the ages of one and three years have some evidence of periodontal disease that requires treatment.

Normal teeth should be white. Gums should be light pink, except in those breeds with pigmented gums (such as Chows). While all pets have some amount of noticeable breath odor, pets with periodontal disease have noticeably disagreeable odors from months to years of decay. While bad breath per se is no big deal, the causes of bad breath is a a very serious problem that ultimately will shorten a pet's life.

The bad breath is just on sign of periodontal disease and is caused by bacteria and their toxins destroying the teeth and gums. Left untreated, the bacteria and their toxins can cause serious health problems for a pet.

Periodontal disease in pets, as in people, is caused by bacteria and plaque. With time, plaque hardens and becomes the yellow-brown tartar commonly seen on the teeth. As bacteria and plaque accumulate, toxins are produced. Over time, these toxins destroy the teeth and gums. Excess tartar, foul breath, loose teeth, bleeding teeth and gums, inflamed and reddened gums, and actual pus coming from the tooth sockets are seen as a result of severe destruction of the oral tissues of the jaw. Gingivitis-stomatitis is a painful inflammatory condition of the gums and other tissues of the mouth.

The term "dental disease" can refer to any problem with a pet's teeth and gums, such as a tumor, a broken tooth, improper dentition that might require orthodontics, or more commonly an infection of the teeth and gums.

As mentioned, periodontal disease, caused by bacteria and their toxins destroying the teeth and gums, can cause other health problems for pets. Every time the dog or cat inhales, it is inhaling bacteria and toxins into its lungs.

Whenever the pet swallows, it is swallowing bacteria and bacterial toxins into its stomach and intestines. Whenever it eats, bacteria and their toxins enter the bloodstream. Over several months or years, these bacteria and toxins can cause heart , liver, kidney, lung and gastrointestinal disease or organ failure.

These problems become more severe as the pet ages due to chronic systems, and chronic wear and tear on aging organs that may not be able to handle this constant load of bacteria and bacterial toxins. To help prevent early death from these devastating diseases, and to relieve the pain associated with dental infections, early treatment of oral infections (periodontal disease) is essential.

The treatment depends upon the severity of the disease. Most pets who have early periodontal disease can be treated by their veterinarians with an ultrasonic scaling and antibiotics if needed. More severe disease often requires advanced dental procedures such as root canals, extractions, and gum surgery, best performed by referral to a specialist. Often oral radiographs (x-rays) will detect disease under the gums that would normally go undetected in the more severe cases. For most pets, an annual dental cleaning will suffice. Some pets may need treatment more frequently. Smaller breeds of dogs often require a cleaning twice each year. Pets with diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, liver or kidney disease, or any problems with their immune systems should have their periodontal infections treated as often as needed to prevent serious complications. For example, recent studies showed that bacteria were often found on abnormal heart valves in pets with heart disease. These bacteria were identical to the ones cultured from the infected teeth and gums. It is no coincidence that many pets with heart disease also have periodontal disease, which can cause a heart infection called bacterial endocarditis.

This condition is life-threatening and very difficult and expensive to treat. One of the most important things to do with pets with heart disease (as well as any chronic disease) is to make sure they have their teeth cleaned at least annually if not more often. Any pet with heart disease needs to have any type of infection prevented at all costs.

Anything the owner can do to decrease infection, such as regular brushing using a product prescribed by the veterinarian, can decrease the number of treatments needed each year. At-home care by owners can go a long way in controlling periodontal infections. Regular brushing with a veterinary dental product, such as a chlorhexidine solution, will significantly slow down the return of periodontal disease. Most pets can easily be trained to accept daily brushing.