



Healthy Teeth, Healthy Pets

As soon as puppy or kitten teeth emerge, it's time to start brushing. Although baby teeth are replaced with adult teeth, the puppy or kitten gets used to the brushing procedure, which continues for life.

Why is this important? Beyond the bad breath caused by rotting teeth and gums -- "dog breath" is a symptom of disease, not a normal part of owning a dog or cat -- the infections caused by dental problems can shorten your pet's life by damaging internal organs. Bad teeth can also leave your pet in constant pain.

Daily removal of plaque is the key to an oral hygiene program. Unless your pet's teeth are brushed daily, plaque, which is an accumulation of bacteria, will build up at the gum line. Eventually calculus forms, further irritating the gums (gingivitis), and then infection progresses to loosen and destroy the attachment of the tooth (periodontal disease). In addition to loose teeth, infection under the gumline can spread to the liver, kidneys, and heart.

Veterinarians now recommend training kittens and puppies to accept having their teeth brushed, a job that's not really that hard, even with older dogs and cats. Approach the task with a positive attitude, take it slow and easy, and then follow with something the pet likes -- a play session or a food treat. There are also products in gel form available that can be applied to teeth to keep them clean of plaque. Use only veterinary toothpaste for pets. Don't use human toothpaste as animals cannot rinse and spit.

For kittens and puppies, the focus is on training and prevention, but adult pets will likely need veterinary attention before a preventive-care program can help. Your veterinarian will check your pet's mouth, teeth and gums as part of the regular examination, and make recommendations based on what he or she finds there.

For many pets, the next step will be a complete dental prophylaxis (cleaning) under anesthesia.

The procedure involves cleaning and polishing the teeth and checking for and treating broken or rotting teeth, cavities, abscesses and periodontal disease. Today's anesthetics are dramatically safer than those of even a few years ago, making the dangers and pain of untreated dental problems the bigger risk to health, even with older pets.



Above: Before dental cleaning



Above: After dental cleaning

How often does my pet need to have teeth cleaned by the veterinarian?

Every pet benefits from an annual physical examination and oral assessment and treatment plan. Depending on the degree of plaque and tartar accumulation, dental prophylaxis can be scheduled annually for most pets. Please talk to your veterinarian to determine what is best for your pet.

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