

DENTAL CARE

Did you know that over 85% of dogs and cats four years old have some form of periodontal disease? We all know the importance of daily brushing to keep our mouths healthy. Just imagine what's going on in the gum lines of Fido or Felix. Not only do they eat what we feed them, but also they sometimes help themselves to stuff that belongs in the garbage.

Most of us see the dentist once or twice a year for cleaning. Animals need that even more than we do. Gum lines are a perfect environment for bacteria to grow at an alarming rate. If left unchecked, bacteria will enter the digestive system when tartar gets dislodged during mastication (chewing). Bacteria finally get into the animal's bloodstream where they can travel to major organs and cause infections that seriously compromise the health of your pet. The three leading causes of demise in pets are cancer, liver failure, and kidney failure. Most often, organ failure is a direct result of infections that begin in a pet's mouth.

The paradox is that as easy as it is for your pet to get periodontal infection, it's just as easy to prevent it. The first step to good oral hygiene is brushing your pet's teeth regularly to reduce plaque buildup and gingivitis. Do not use toothpaste intended for humans. It can upset your pet's stomach. It is best to start brushing at an early age. If not, you may find it difficult to convince your pet to allow you to brush its teeth later on. Giving your pets chew toys and feeding them dental chews is the next best thing to regular brushing. New drinking water additives help control plaque formation and may limit the need for frequent dental cleanings at the vet's.

Here are six signs of poor dental health in dogs and cats:

- Bad breath, one of the first signs of dental trouble
- A yellowish-brown crust of plaque on the teeth
- Red and swollen gums
- Pain or bleeding while eating
- Loss of appetite or difficulty chewing
- Loose or missing teeth

Visit your vet for regular dental exams. Most vets recommend professional cleaning every 6 to 18 months, depending on the condition of the pet's teeth.

Dental disease decreases life expectancy for pets by an average of two years. If you want to have your furry friend around for as long as possible, be sure to schedule regular checkups and dental cleanings with your vet.