

Home Oral Care, Annual Exams and Cleanings

The more we learn about oral care, the more we recognize that there is a relationship between the state of the mouth and the state of the body.



“Doggie breath” is not normal and can indicate the presence of harmful bacteria in your pet’s mouth. A dental prophylaxis, or cleaning, is designed to remove plaque and tartar both above and below the gumline. Periodontal disease is a consequence of plaque accumulation leading to gingivitis, gum recession, bone destruction and eventual tooth loss. Prophylaxis means preventive; the goal is to prevent the harmful effects of periodontal disease and maintain a healthy mouth before permanent tooth loss.

Most people brush their teeth twice a day and floss periodically, but we still need to see a dentist once or twice a year to remove accumulated tartar. Your pet doesn’t brush, floss or rinse with “triple protection” mouthwash and has probably never visited a veterinary dentist. It is not surprising that by the time we treat our four-legged companions they have dental disease that requires advanced treatment, such as periodontal surgery and extractions. The early stage of periodontal disease (when tartar accumulation is first noted) is completely reversible, so this is the best time to perform a cleaning. As the disease progresses untreated, it can be impossible to return teeth to their original condition.

Many families report that their pet does not show any signs of oral soreness and “is eating well.” However, most pets do not show signs of oral pain. Plaque accumulation is not painful, but a secondary infection can be. An oral exam provides us with the opportunity to identify painful or concerning conditions, such as tooth resorption (affecting three of four adult cats), fractured teeth and oral tumors. Many of the conditions affecting the mouth are a slow deterioration, not something easily recognized like a fractured bone. It is often not until the patient recovers and has the opportunity to be pain free that the owners recognize a difference in their pet.

One concern of many pet owners regarding dental care is the need for general anesthesia. Although the tartar (also known as calculus) above the gumline is the most visible, the plaque that accumulates below the gumline is the most dangerous. We cannot clean below the gumline on a patient that is awake. Unfortunately, our pets do not sit nicely in a chair with their mouth held open for a cleaning. Today’s veterinary anesthetic medications and monitoring equipment rival those in the human field. These advances allow us to assess your pet’s vital parameters, making appropriate adjustments along the way to maintain the safest plane of anesthesia, even in patients with concurrent medical concerns.

So, what can you do for your beloved friend to help ensure their mouth stays healthy and comfortable? For most pets, daily brushing and an annual anesthetized oral exam and cleaning are a great start. Advanced periodontal care or extractions may be necessary to return the mouth to a healthy condition. In some cases, your veterinarian may refer you to a specialty hospital for treatment that requires specialized training and equipment. Combining professional care and appropriate home care helps maintain a comfortable, healthy and functional mouth for your best friend.

For more information on this subject, speak to the veterinarian who is treating your pet.

