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Independent, Kind and Honest Veterinary Care in the Heart of Ryedale

Dental Disease in Dogs and Cats

Dental disease is extremely common in dogs and cats. Periodontal disease (disease that affects the structures which support the teeth) is the most common problem in pets, which is in contrast to humans where dental caries and decay occur more frequently.

Periodontal disease begins with the formation of plaque, which is a creamy yellow substance made of saliva, proteins and bacteria. Plaque is not easily seen with the naked eye but begins to form a few minutes after brushing both in humans and animals. After several weeks the gums become inflamed and red - this is a condition known as gingivitis. In the UK over 80% of dogs and cats suffer from gingivitis. As the disease progresses the plaque becomes mineralised by salivary calcium phosphate to form the hard brown substance called tartar. The gums then recede and bleed easily, they are painful and the breath smells. Human sufferers complain of a horrible taste in the mouth.

Once severe gingivitis has formed, bacteria can enter the bloodstream every time the animal chews. These bacteria can lodge in the kidneys, lungs or heart valves especially if these areas are already diseased. There are therefore serious consequences to the rest of the body from dental disease, which is of particular importance in older animals.

Some animals are more likely to develop periodontal disease; on the whole smaller breed dogs are most susceptible. Certain lines of purebred cats such as Abyssinians, Persians and Siamese are more likely to develop the disease at an early age.

HOME CARE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT WAY OF CONTROLLING PERIODONTAL DISEASE.

TOOTHBRUSHING

This is by far the most effective way of reducing periodontal disease. It must be done as part of the daily routine, once weekly brushing is less beneficial. A soft/medium paediatric or specially designed dog toothbrush is the best thing to



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use but finger brushes are also available. Human toothpaste should NOT be used, as animals do not like the taste or the frothing action. Also human toothpaste is not designed to be swallowed and it may cause a gastric upset. Special animal toothpastes that contain abrasives are available in different flavours such as chicken, beef, biscuit, malt and shrimp. The majority of dogs can be trained to allow brushing. It is much harder to train cats. Attempt to brush your cats teeth twice, and if after this they are very reluctant then you will never be able to brush their teeth.

HOW TO BRUSH YOUR PETS TEETH

1. Press the toothpaste down onto the bristles so the animal doesn't lick it off.
2. Concentrate on the outer surfaces of the upper teeth to begin with, always starting with the back teeth, as this part of the mouth is the least sensitive. As your pet gets used to having its teeth cleaned you can progress to the lower and inner surfaces of the teeth.
3. It may be easier to hold the animals mouth closed at first so that they don't chew the toothbrush. Concentrate on the junction between the teeth and the gums. Do not scrub the teeth, rather brush gently. Bleeding will occur if there is gingivitis present. This will be normal in any animal that doesn't already have its teeth cleaned so do not be alarmed.
4. Give the animal a treat when finished as this will help with the training process. If the gums are severely infected then your veterinary surgeon or nurse may recommend an antibacterial chlorhexidine based mouthwash to be given orally to the animal every day.

DIETS

There are now several diets on the market, which have been designed to assist in the prevention of dental disease. Complete diets are available that can be fed exclusively or as a treat. The special biscuits do not crumble when bitten but allow the teeth to penetrate them and therefore act to wipe the teeth clean. Please ask a vet or a nurse for more information on any of these diets above. Treats such as rawhide chews, pigs ears, rask biscuits and raw vegetables (carrots, cauliflower stalks) will also help clean teeth. Bones are not recommended,



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as they are responsible for many broken teeth, and carry the risk of gut blockage or damage.

DENTAL PROCEDURES

If severe periodontal disease is present then your veterinary surgeon or nurse may recommend for your animal to have its teeth professionally cleaned. For humane and safety reasons this has to be done under general anaesthesia. Your pet will be thoroughly checked by examination and blood samples taken where necessary before an anaesthetic is given. The tartar is removed from the teeth and then they are scaled ultrasonically and polished. Any teeth that are severely broken, loose or diseased are extracted. Antibiotics may be given after a dental if gingivitis is severe. It is very important to continue home care and have regular veterinary health checks after a dental. Do not hesitate to ask for more advice if you are worried about your pet's teeth. Please ask one of our nurses to demonstrate how to brush teeth if you are unsure.