

The Choppers Challenge

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
January 2019

Don't forget about dental care for pets

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Who doesn't love the snow-white teeth of puppies and kittens? Did you know they don't miraculously remain that way without some TLC?

Routine dental care is important for dogs and cats, as it is for humans. The American Veterinary Dental Society (AVDS) notes that 80 percent of dogs and 70 percent of cats show signs of dental disease as early as age three. Without preventive maintenance, the mouth can be vulnerable to tooth and gum disease, which can lead to serious health issues elsewhere in the body.

The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), which is the only organization to accredit companion animal veterinary hospitals in the United States and Canada, says oral hygiene "is one of the most overlooked areas of pet health."

Bacteria forms an invisible film, or plaque, on teeth that can calcify into a yellow-brownish tartar, which encourages plaque to spread. Over time, this buildup can cause painful infections at a tooth's root. Plaque and tartar need to be routinely cleaned away, or they can result in gingivitis (gum inflammation), bad breath, periodontal disease, and eventual tooth and/or bone loss.

"Periodontal disease doesn't just affect your pet's mouth," according to the American Veterinary

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Medical Association (AVMA). “Other health problems found in association with periodontal disease include kidney, liver, and heart muscle changes.”

I checked in with Banfield Pet Hospital, which has a nationwide partnership with PetSmart and locations in midtown Miami and Aventura. Banfield’s Applied Research Knowledge Team (BARK) points out that bacteria in the pet’s mouth goes into the bloodstream and clings to heart arteries. Pets with periodontal disease are more likely to have heart disease as well. Small-breed dogs are most prone to developing gum and tooth issues.

How do pet owners help prevent tooth problems? The Banfield dental care link on its website (www.banfield.com) lays out a three-step plan to follow:

Flip: Flip your pet’s lip to check for tartar and bad breath.

Check: Have your pet checked by a vet, and schedule an annual cleaning.

Treat: Brush your pet’s teeth at home, and give dental chews and treats as part of a daily regimen.

The website also offers do-it-yourself-at-home video tips on caring for your dog’s or cat’s teeth. They recommend brushing with a toothbrush or finger brush, and using *only* pet-safe toothpaste (not human-grade toothpaste, which is harmful to pets). Chew toys and dental treats help maintain tartar-free teeth in-between professional teeth cleanings. Dry kibble is more tooth-friendly than wet food, which sticks to the teeth. Pet dental wipes are an easy-to-use, disposable option for daily maintenance.

Professional teeth cleaning? For pets? Yes. The AAHA recommends regular examinations and dental cleanings under anesthesia and intubation for adult dogs and cats, starting at one year for cats and small-breed dogs, and at two years for larger-breed dogs. A pre-exam is necessary to make sure a pet can endure anesthesia, which could include bloodwork, urine tests, electrocardiography, and X-rays.

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During the procedure, your pet will have vital signs monitored while undergoing ultrasonic scaling of teeth below and above the gum line to remove plaque and tartar; a tooth polishing and a fluoride treatment. Depending on the level of dental disease (Level 1 up to Level 4), a cost estimate for the procedure is \$283 plus \$48 for a pre-examination at Banfield. This includes pre-anesthetic blood panel, IV catheter placement, intra-operative fluid therapy, injections for sedation and pain management, intubation, and monitoring before, during, and after the procedure and recovery. A pet with Level 4 disease will likely require tooth extractions at additional costs.

Anesthesia-free dental cleaning is an option for dogs and cats with temperaments that can tolerate a manual scaling and are not healthy enough to undergo anesthesia. It is difficult to clean above the gum line during this awake procedure, which is not considered professional teeth cleaning by the AAHA and the American Veterinary Dental College (AVDC).

Many vet hospitals in the Miami area offer this alternative through Pet Dental Services (www.petdentalservices.com), a non-anesthetic teeth cleaning provider whose hygienists visit patients under licensed vet supervision at the vet clinic by appointment only. Cost for this preventive, anesthesia-free dental cleaning at Siegel TLC Animal Clinic in North Miami is \$195.

The AVMA lists signs to watch for that could indicate a dental health problem in your pet. It recommends seeing a veterinarian if your pet experiences any of the following: bad breath; broken or loose teeth; retained baby teeth (which can cause misalignment of teeth and bite); teeth that are discolored or covered in tartar; abnormal chewing, drooling, or dropping food from the mouth; reduced appetite or refusal to eat; pawing or pain in or around the mouth; bleeding gums; or swelling in areas surrounding the mouth.

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