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### DENTAL AND ORAL HEALTH IN DOGS AND CATS

For pet caregivers, understanding the relevant considerations with dental and oral health in dogs and cats is an important aspect of the relationship they have with their pets. Maintaining a healthy mouth, gums, and teeth is important when caring for our pets. There are a variety of methods to help prevent, identify, and manage dental disease. Having an effective knowledge of the relevant considerations and signs associated with dental and oral disease is beneficial to help avoid or reduce the discomfort associated with dental and oral disease.

#### GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Dental disease, and periodontal disease specifically, is one of the most common diseases of dogs and cats. In fact, nearly all dogs and cats will have symptoms of periodontal disease at some point in their life. Periodontal disease often develops sooner in a pet's life than most would expect. Periodontal disease generally affects smaller dogs more than larger dogs - Greyhounds being the exception to the rule. Periodontal disease involves chronic inflammation, infection, odor, and pain associated with the teeth. As with most things, prevention is generally better, safer, cheaper, and easier than treatment. Unfortunately dogs and cats with dental diseases typically show signs in ways that are often too subtle to be reliably and readily detected until the condition is advanced. We frequently treat painful dental diseases and following treatment we consistently receive positive responses from our patients who were previously demonstrating the significant pain and discomfort associated with dental diseases. Cats and dogs will often be much more playful, active, social, and play with toys they hadn't played with for years soon after treatment for painful dental conditions. Understanding the prevention of dental disease as well as the identification, management, and treatment options available when dental disease develops helps pet caregivers prevent and alleviate the pain and discomfort associated with these conditions.



#### PREVENTION CONSIDERATIONS

##### Tooth brushing

The most effective, beneficial, and cost-effective (cheapest) way to prevent periodontal disease in dogs and cats is regular tooth brushing. Unfortunately, not all dogs and seemingly most cats will not tolerate tooth brushing. In order to be effective, tooth brushing must be performed at least three times per week. Daily tooth brushing is ideal. The method of training a dog or cat to accept tooth brushing is important and there are many videos available that demonstrate how to do this. The keys to successfully getting your pet to accept tooth brushing are:





## Tooth brushing Continued

- Start at a young age! Training young patients is generally easier, but pets of all ages can be trained to accept tooth brushing. Medically speaking, starting at a young age, prior to the development of tartar and periodontal disease, gives the best results.
- Make tooth brushing rewarding and beneficial for your pet! You probably have a good idea of what gets your pet's tail wagging - i.e. treats, positive tone of voice, petting/scratching, etc. You want to train your pet in a way that creates the mindset for your pet that something good will happen when they see you getting the toothbrush and toothpaste out. Once this mindset is created, you can scale back on the treats/praise/reward approach however frequent reminders for your pet are worthwhile.
- Develop the habit and routine for yourself! Getting yourself into the habit of brushing your pet's teeth on a daily basis may be, at least for me, the most difficult part of the process. Put a reminder by the food bowl, on the refrigerator, your phone, etc. to help achieve this goal.

### Other important considerations with regular teeth brushing:

- Tooth brushing combined with regular professional dental cleaning/services is by far the best way to prevent, mitigate, or manage periodontal disease in dogs and cats.
- Some dogs and most cats will struggle to accept and tolerate tooth brushing. If this is the case for you, do not force this issue. It is not worth ruining your relationship with your pet. Other efforts can be pursued to help prevent and manage periodontal disease.
- Tartar (brown material on teeth) will likely still develop even with daily tooth brushing. However, it will develop much more slowly than without tooth brushing and will help to minimize or avoid gingivitis (early periodontal disease). You can not brush off tartar - this can only be done with professional cleaning.
- The type of toothpaste and toothbrush used is less important than the frequency of tooth brushing. There are a variety of toothbrushes available including toothbrushes intended for children and adults. I use a power toothbrush (Phillips Sonicare) for my dog which makes the effort more effective and easier (for me) than using a standard toothbrush. This is a link: <https://accpingree.com/educational-videos/> that demonstrates my dog getting his teeth brushed with a power toothbrush. It also demonstrates what things should look like for a dog that is comfortable and accepting of the process.
- Attempting to brush your pet's teeth is worth trying! Even if you suspect your pet will not accept toothbrushing, it is worth trying. Take a slow, gentle, positive approach and see if your pet will surprise you!



### Alternatives to tooth brushing

While regular tooth brushing is best this often is not a realistic option for many dogs and cats. Here are some options and considerations regarding alternatives:

Therapeutic dental diet (Hill's T/D diet): Subjectively, this option seems to be an effective option especially for cats for the regular prevention of periodontal disease. This type of therapeutic food is formulated in a way to help slow the development of tartar and periodontal disease. For dogs, the kibble size with this diet (even the "small bites" option) often is just too large for some dogs to accept. Like tooth brushing however, it is worth trying! Dental chews, water additives, dental wipes, etc.: There are many options like this that, despite advertised claims and marketing efforts, probably only have a very minimal positive effect, if any, on the prevention of tartar and periodontal disease.



## Prevention Considerations Continued

### "Safe" toys/chews

The general rule of thumb for any chew-type toy is that the material the toy/chew is made of should be soft enough to make an indentation with your fingernail when pressed. Anything harder and the risk for injury and fracture to the tooth increases significantly. Toys and chews made of harder materials likely will last longer however it is cheaper to replace a toy than it is to extract or treat a broken tooth. Many commonly used chews such as bones, antlers, white plastic-type artificial bones are too hard and can cause teeth to break. Also, with regards to dental disease, these chews and toys do little to prevent disease despite marketing claims.



## PROFESSIONAL DENTAL CLEANING

Annual professional dental cleanings (dentals) combined with regular, effective preventative care are the best methods for preventing or managing dental diseases in dogs and cats. The frequency of performing a professional dental cleaning is in part dependent on your individual goals for your pet. In general, annual professional dental cleanings should be strongly considered for adult dogs and cats. An effective professional dental cleaning does require general anesthesia. As such, this necessity has to be factored in the decision to perform a dental cleaning especially when patient's move into their senior years or develop certain health issues. Generally speaking however the anesthesia associated with a professional dental cleaning is made very safe by way of a number of different methods.

## In Conclusion

We have the ability to prevent and mitigate dental diseases in dogs and cats. Regular tooth brushing combined with regular professional dental cleanings are the best methods we have for preventing the pain, odor, and infection associated with the most common dental diseases in dogs and cats. As with most things in life, prevention of dental disease is far better, safer, cheaper, and easier than treatment of dental disease. There is no one-size-fits-all approach with management and prevention of dental disease in dogs and cats. There are far too many variables involved. Knowledge of the options available to you as a pet caregiver and discussion with your veterinary care providers can help you achieve what is best for you and your pets. We are happy to help!



*Happy  
Brushing!*

