

Dentistry, Is It Really Necessary?

By George Cuellar, DVM, Diplomate ABVP C/F

I am asked this question way too much and my answer is always, “It depends.” It depends on how healthy and comfortable we want our pets to be. While there are many myths and products to create the illusion of dental health, none work better than brushing teeth. This is true for people and true for pets. Ask yourself this question, if you ate only dry food biscuits and gnawed on a Greenie now and then would you really not brush your teeth? That would not be pretty, right? Well, it is the same for pets. While there are plenty of products that help with dental care, there is no substitute for brushing. I know, I know, this is not easy but any effort goes a long way. For a 4-week training video from The Cornell Feline Health Center, “Brushing Your Cat's Teeth”, go to our website, socialvet.com, and click on ‘links’.

To check to see how your pet's teeth are doing just lift up the upper lip and take a look. Do you see pearly white teeth and nice pink healthy gums? Well, then everything is fine and if you start brushing at least 3-4 times a week it should stay that way. Do you see a brownish, tan, kind of crusty, ugly covering on the teeth near the gum line or all over the teeth? That is calculus or tartar and it is a form of hardened dental plaque. Dental plaque is formed by colonizing bacteria trying to attach themselves to a smooth surface of a tooth. If the plaque is not brushed off, it causes tartar by the continual accumulation of minerals from saliva on the plaque. Tartar's rough surface provides an ideal medium for further plaque formation, threatening the health of the gums. We grade this tartar from zero to four. Zero means no tartar and four means the grossest mess where only tartar is seen and no normal tooth surface can be found.

The effects of bacterial colonies from plaque and tartar on the teeth is inflammation of the gums and loss of bone holding the teeth. This inflammation is called periodontal disease or gingivitis. Gingivitis also has grades. Grade one is just a small red line on the gums just above the teeth, Grade two is a redder line that bleeds when touched, Grade three is red and swollen gums with mild discharge and some bone loss, while with Grade four the gums are really infected and the teeth are loose and falling out.

Another question I hear when I see severe dental disease (grade four tartar with grade four gingivitis) is why are pets not in extreme pain. I usually feel like they are in pain but the discomfort has been there so long they do not react to it any more. When we finish the dental and extractions on these dogs and cats they feel so much better they act like “puppies or kittens” again according to owners. In addition to the pain and inflammation of dental disease, there are body and organ effects. These effects occur when the infection from the bacterial colonies on the tartar get into the blood stream through the inflamed gums. This condition causes severe sometime irreversible damage to kidneys and heart.

What about non-anesthetic or “twilight” cleaning without anesthesia? I am not in favor of this but that's because there is no way to get the tartar under the gum line with this technique. Tartar under the gum line is not visible but will still cause inflammation and periodontal disease even when the teeth look clean. If you use this method, make sure it is done under the supervision of a licensed veterinarian otherwise it is considered practicing without a license.

Consider a full cleaning with an anesthesia. Anesthesia these days is very safe, in the right hands. Age is no longer a criterion to anesthetize or not, health is more important. A physical examination, routine

blood tests, and sometimes x-rays are needed to evaluate the health of a pet for anesthesia. The cost is well made up for with the quality of the procedure, the amelioration of pain, and the sophistication of the whole process. After anesthesia, the teeth are scaled with an ultrasonic cleaner on the surface and below the gum line, the gums are inspected and probed for pockets of infection, teeth that are loose, infected, or fractured are extracted, and the remaining teeth are polished. The procedure takes about 40 minutes and up to 1-2 hours for multiple extractions. Pets recover well and go home the same day usually with pain medication and antibiotics.

There is no substitute for good dental care and the good breath that goes with it.

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