



DENTAL CARE FOR *Your Pet*

VETERINARY DENTIST DR. JAMES ANTHONY OF THE WESTERN COLLEGE OF VETERINARY MEDICINE ANSWERS QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMON DENTAL PROBLEMS IN PETS — AND WHAT OWNERS CAN DO TO MAINTAIN THEIR PETS' ORAL HEALTH.

Interview by Adrienne Thomas, Media Group

Q. What is periodontal disease?

Periodontal disease is anything that affects the gums causing inflammation, swelling, or irritation. It's the most common disease diagnosed and treated in veterinary general practices. Studies have shown that 85 per cent of animals over three years of age will have periodontal disease.

The disease has four stages with stage four being the worst. Stage one involves a slight irritation due mainly to plaque, which is 80 per cent bacteria. The plaque accumulates on and around the teeth and mixes with saliva and other debris to form *calculus* — the brown stuff often seen on our pets' teeth.

Q. What can happen if the disease is left unchecked?

If left on its own, periodontal disease progresses to a very destructive and painful process in which a pet loses teeth and bone. Abscesses or loose teeth cause pain in the mouth. The animal may not want to eat, may drool because of the pain, and, in advanced cases, will have very foul breath. The animal can lose teeth and then won't be able to chew properly. As the disease advances, there is bone loss and greater risk of fractures. Jaw movement may be affected making it almost impossible for the animal to chew. Think of your dog's or cat's mouth as being like our fingers. If the animal loses its teeth, it's like us losing our fingers. Your pet can survive, but its quality of life is decreased.

Other parts of the body are also affected. The abscesses can move into areas such as the sinus cavity and may eventually appear in other body organs. As the animal breathes through its mouth, it inhales the bacteria causing chronic tracheal irritations and coughs. In addition, the bacteria from the mouth can spread to other organs causing diseases such as kidney and heart disease. There's an association, especially in cats, between dental disease and kidney disease which can lead to kidney failure.

Q. What can pet owners do to address periodontal disease?

Pet owners should take their animals to the veterinarian twice a year for a full physical which includes an oral exam. During the initial examination, they should ask the veterinarian to show them what a normal mouth looks like, and they should question what is and isn't normal. Between visits, if they note anything changing, they should consult with their veterinarian. That way, earlier detection can take place, and problems can be treated more easily and simply. The owners can save money while helping their pets to live healthier, happier lives.

Q. What's involved in a dental cleaning?

If only a mild procedure is necessary, we may recommend home care. If a thorough cleaning is required, the veterinarian may recommend a true oral hygiene procedure under general anesthetic. The anesthetic is required because the sharp instruments used to clean the teeth may cause discomfort as the veterinarian goes beneath the gum line where the problem starts.

Q. What's the goal of a home care program?

A cat has 30 teeth and a dog has 42. These teeth are much longer than what you see; two thirds of them are roots. With periodontal disease, the gums recede and expose these roots; that's what we're trying to prevent with home care. Many pets have undergone the veterinarian's oral hygiene procedure and haven't needed another procedure, even after 15 years, because their owners have been following the home care program.

Continued on page 8



Cameraman Mark Utley films Dr. James Anthony as he gives teeth brushing tips for pet owners. Animal health technologist April Penner assists while second-year veterinary student Amanda Laycock watches.

HEALTHY ADVICE FOR PET OWNERS:

If you live in Saskatchewan and subscribe to SaskTel's Max Entertainment Services, check out a new show called "For Pet's Sake" that's offered through Max Local on Demand (Channel 48). Each of the six half-hour episodes includes a dog training tip, an exotic pet feature, a working animals segment, and expert veterinary advice. Six clinicians and specialists at WCVM — including veterinary dentist Dr. James Anthony — provide valuable advice on topics such as eye care for pets, foods and products that are toxic to pets, exotic pet care, nutrition and vaccinations. Visit www.sasktel.com (select "Pets" folder to access episodes).

Cont'd (DENTAL CARE)

Q. What's a typical home care program?

First, I believe in customizing a home care program to meet the needs of both pet and owner. The big thing is to make teeth cleaning something that's fun for both of you.

One of the most important ways to keep an animal's mouth healthy is to brush the teeth. Your pet's teeth should be brushed daily, taking only 30 to 60 seconds. Brushing should be a fun thing that's done when you and your pet are relaxed. It's most important to get the proper products and learn to brush properly so that you don't hurt the animal — a negative experience for both you and your pet.

If you're unable to brush the teeth, you can approach oral health in other ways. Oral cleansing products can aid in conditioning the gums to make them stronger and more resistant to gum disease. Another option is a rinse that prevents plaque from adhering to the tooth surface. Dental diets specifically formulated to prevent dental disease are great for helping to prevent calculus and plaque accumulations. I recommend them as a treat rather than a diet.

You can also combine brushing with a dental diet. After brushing, give your pet lots of love along with a couple of the dental treats so that it actually looks forward to the cleaning. Many owners tell me that as soon as they bring out the brush, their pet comes running because it knows it's going to get treats and a lot of love.

Q. What products are the best to buy?

Talk to your veterinarian and ask his or her advice. Next, look for the Veterinary Oral Health Council's seal of approval when you're searching for dental health products. This seal indicates that the products have undergone testing and research to prove that they're beneficial. Their uses vary tremendously and include products to put into the animal's mouth as well as chew toys and diet products.

Q. Is there a specific technique for brushing the teeth?

First, you need the proper tools. Start with a dental dog or cat toothpaste which is designed to be swallowed without causing any digestive upsets as human toothpaste might.

Next, select an appropriate toothbrush for your pet. We recommend human brushes: an adult-sized brush for large dogs such as golden retrievers

and labs, a child's brush with soft bristles for smaller breed dogs such as terriers and cocker spaniels, and a periodontal toothbrush, which is smaller and has bristles that go all the way around, for cats and really tiny dogs. These brushes are available at drugstores and veterinary clinics or even from your own dentist.

Brush very gently at first; begin with just a little stroke to get your pet used to it. After about two weeks, you can brush as hard as you would your own teeth.

Q. When should people start this treatment?

The time to start home care is at the puppy or kitten stage. Get them used to having something in their mouths by just rubbing your finger across the gums at first. Don't start brushing until the adult teeth start coming in — usually around six months. Remember that brushing can be painful during teething; also, a loose baby tooth will hurt, so don't brush that area.

Q. Does dental health change with age?

I believe that old age isn't a disease; it's just wear and tear. Yes, there will be some wear and tear in an older animal, but if the mouth has been cared for, there shouldn't be many changes. We should see only some wearing and some abrasion on the teeth over time.

Q. Is it normal to see tooth loss in an older cat or dog?

No. Ideally, an animal's teeth should last throughout its lifetime, and periodontal disease should not cause your pet to lose teeth because it's preventable. The veterinarian's oral hygiene procedures combined with good home care should ensure that aging animals keep all their teeth. **V**

Vet Topics thanks Adrienne Thomas of Saskatoon's Media Group for providing her complete interview with Dr. James Anthony of WCVM to develop this issue's pet health management articles on oral health care. Thomas helped to write and produce "For Pet's Sake" (see above). Interview summary by Lynne Gunville.

MORE RESOURCES ONLINE: Visit www.cahf.usask.ca to read a step-by-guide on how to brush your pet's teeth, plus a detailed account of what to expect when you bring in your pet for an oral hygiene procedure at the WCVM Veterinary Teaching Hospital.