

## The Importance Of Dental Care

Like humans, dogs and cats are born with two sets of teeth. The “baby” teeth are called deciduous teeth and exist for less than six months. These teeth are replaced by the permanent teeth meant to last the animal’s lifetime. But, like humans, teeth and gums are prone to have problems. If not addressed these problems can result in pain, secondary health problems, and even death.

If teeth do not receive proper care then plaque builds up on the tooth surface. What follows is a series of events culminating in severe infection and loss of the tooth. Plaque allows bacteria to make a home on the tooth surface. The plaque is also the first stage in the formation of tartar. The bacteria colonize the surface of the teeth and gums and start destroying both. Infection causes the connection between the tooth and gums to painfully degrade. Eventually the tooth is lost or no longer salvageable. The infection does not necessarily stop there. The incredible blood supply to the mouth allows the bacteria to enter the bloodstream. This can lead to life-threatening infections of other organs such as the liver and kidneys. The bacteria sometime find a home on the valves of the heart causing potentially irreversible valve damage and eventual heart failure. We see several cases each year where infection is so widespread due to dental disease that the very survival of the patient is in question.

Dental disease is preventable. By following some guidelines dental disease can be controlled and your pet can grow old with a mouthful of intact, healthy teeth.

- 1) **BRUSH, BRUSH, BRUSH!!!** Nothing replaces good tooth brushing. Start dogs and cats off young. Start by introducing the toothpaste alone for a few days using just your finger. Then gradually introduce the brush. Brush every day or at least every other day using only toothpaste especially formulated for dogs and cats. Human toothpaste is unacceptable because it contains foaming actions that may make the animal sick, doesn’t taste good to most pets, contains far too much salt, and just plain isn’t meant to be eaten! Pet toothpaste is meant to be eaten and comes in popular flavors such as poultry.
- 2) Feed a high quality DRY pet food. Dry foods provide abrasion that aids in removing some plaque. Food alone can play a major role. **DO NOT GIVE TABLE FOOD TO PETS!**
- 3) Schedule regular examinations by a Veterinarian who can assess the animal’s overall condition, check the teeth for early signs of problems, and evaluate the heart for signs of valvular disease associated with dental infections.
- 4) Even if you follow the above recommendations your pet will probably have to have his or her teeth cleaned professionally at some point. The removal of dental tartar and ultrasonic cleaning under the visible gum line is crucial for maintaining tooth health. Such cleaning is done under general anesthesia and ends with the teeth being polished and treated with fluoride. A comprehensive home dental program should then be continued afterward.