

## **Dental Health for Pets**

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If you could do something in addition to routine vaccinations that would protect your cat or dog's quality of life, and quite possibly extend its life, would you? That one thing should be attending to its dental health. February is National Pet Dental Health Month. Whether you have a new puppy or kitten, or whether your pet is older, there are steps you can take to protect your pet from periodontal disease.

Periodontal disease develops from a build-up of plaque and tartar, and the inflammation it causes can lead to abscesses (pockets of infection), tooth loss, pain, appetite loss and lethargy. Over time it can even lead to kidney, liver or heart disease, as the constant inflammation and resulting infection affect those organs. Just as it can in humans, poor dental health can rob a pet of its energy and enjoyment of life.

Recently a new client brought her 10-year-old female Schnauzer "Greta" in for a check-up. The dog suffers from congestive heart failure and kidney disease. It's impossible to say whether her poor dental health was definitely the cause of Greta's other health conditions, but like many smaller breed dogs she had terrible teeth. Her owner was afraid to allow Greta to undergo anesthesia in order for me to work on her mouth, but the dog's mouth was in such poor condition that she finally agreed.

With careful monitoring Greta did well under the anesthesia. I removed several rotting teeth and packed the holes with medicine. I also cleaned and polished Greta's remaining teeth, and cleaned thoroughly along the edges of her gums. The dog was sent

home with a course of antibiotics, and I asked the owner to bring Greta back in a week for a recheck.

When the owner returned she told me she could not believe the change in Greta's behavior over the previous week. She had assumed that Greta's lack of energy and playfulness was the inevitable result of her beloved dog growing older, and of her medical conditions. However, after the dental and tooth extractions Greta slept less, wagged her tail and played more, and had a better appetite. She was acting like a puppy! As an added bonus her breath had lost the foul odor it had carried for years.

Cats can also suffer from periodontal disease and need dental care. Whether you are caring for a cat or a dog, however, you can take some basic steps to promote its dental health:

- Consult your veterinarian about your pet's dental and overall health. Ask whether your pet would benefit from prescription food that is specifically formulated to maintain dental health. Avoid regular canned pet food.
- Gently brush your pet's teeth several times per week. It is very important to use toothpaste made for pets. You can use a regular soft-bristle human toothbrush, although you may find it easier to use one designed for pets. Most veterinarians carry toothpaste and brushes.
- Have your adult dog's teeth cleaned at least once yearly, or as recommended by your veterinarian. In the case of dental health, an ounce of prevention is definitely worth a pound of cure!