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Follow these steps to keep pets' teeth healthy

Once again it is that time of the year when veterinarians direct their attention to pet dental care. We focus on educating our clients about dental home care as well as recommending appropriate dental procedures. By age 3, 85 percent of pets need dental care. The overall health of your pet can be seriously affected by neglected oral hygiene. The bacteria found in the mouth, which causes bad breath, can result in seriously diseased teeth and gums. This bacteria sheds internally, which can result in premature deterioration of vital organs.



MARYBETH RYMER, DVM
PAWS AND CLAWS

dry. Look for foods that have the Veterinary Oral Health Council Seal of Acceptance. These foods have been formulated to better remove biofilm.

gulped. Again, look for the VOHC seal for best results.

Cats are rarely chewers, but consider offering some chew sticks or toys. Otherwise, VOHC dental treats are recommended.

Step 3: Brushing

Brushing your pet's teeth two to three times per week is perhaps the most important dental care you can provide. It helps to start your pet at an early age, but not during the teething stage from 3.5 to 6 months old. The gums are tender at this time, and brushing will become a painful, unpleasant experience.

Choose a convenient time when your pet is relaxed. For the first few days, hold your pet as you normally do when petting it. Slowly lift your pet's lip and gently massage the teeth and gums with your finger. Start with the front teeth and begin rubbing back teeth a few days later. End with praise and a healthy treat. After your pet accepts this handling, wrap a cloth or gauze around your finger, add pet toothpaste, and gently rub your pet's teeth and gums. Many pets love the malt, beef, fish or poultry flavors of pet toothpaste and consider it a treat. Your veterinarian can provide a pet toothbrush. Place a small amount of pet toothpaste on the pet toothbrush. Gently raise your pet's lip and place the brush against the teeth at a 45-

degree angle to the gumline. With a slow back and forth motion, gently brush one side. Be careful not to go beyond your pet's comfort level. Increase brushing until you spend about 30 seconds of brushing per side. After each session, reward your pet with praise and a healthy VOHC treat.

One of my more memorable home dental care successes was a 12-year-old golden retriever with beautiful white teeth. The owner set a brushing routine as a puppy connected with his own dental hygiene. Eventually, Sierra would follow his owner into the bathroom and put his front feet up on the sink patiently waiting for his tooth brushing turn.

Step 4: Observe for the 8 Warning Signs

While brushing your pet's teeth, observe the mouth for these signs: Bad breath, swollen or bleeding gums, broken or discolored teeth, drooling or excessive salivation, loss of appetite, swelling under the eyes, discharge from nose and weight loss. If you have concerns, contact your local veterinarian.

Step 5: Schedule Annual Dental Exams

Veterinarians routinely examine your pet's mouth during physical exams. We grade

See Teeth, page B7

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Step 1: Dental Diets

Dental care should be high on your list when you first bring home your new cat or dog. Your choice of food is important. Dry food is key to shearing off the biofilm that builds on teeth. This film is composed of saliva, food debris and bacteria. All puppies should be started on dry food. It may be tempting to feed those cute little Yorkie pups canned food or people food, but once we start, it is difficult to switch to dry food. The biofilm develops into brown calculus harboring bacteria. Gingivitis then forms, which progresses into periodontal disease and eventually tooth loss.

Starting kittens on dry food is also recommended. But cats often develop diseases requiring increased water intake, so I like to feed half canned and half

Step 2: Toys and Treats

Dogs are chewers, and providing the appropriate toys will promote good dental care. There are many chew toys to choose from. The firm rubber toys with holes to hide food to attract your dog's attention are the safest. Rawhides and similar semi-digestible chews have questionable safety. You must assess how your pet chews these items. It is safer if your dog chews slowly, "melting" the rawhide over time. But if your pup bites them into pieces, these pieces may become caught in the mouth or throat or potentially cause intestinal obstruction. Dogs may also fracture teeth on these items. Edible treats that are formulated to clean teeth also work better if chewed over time rather than



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Zappa is a busy and friendly dog with a zest for life. Just over

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The adoption fee for Zappa is \$225 and includes the first six

training courses.

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