Why is Dental Care important for your Pet?

Most people are very aware of their own teeth. We know about plaque control, cavity prevention and the social evils of bad breath. Most people also visit their dentist regularly. Despite this awareness of human dentistry, many pet owners do not realise their animals are subject to the same problems.

Why care for your pet's teeth?

The most common disease in pets is periodontal disease. They are also subject to broken teeth, orthodontic problems and even cavities. All of these problems will obviously affect your animal's mouth, but can also lead to infections that introduce bacteria into other parts of the body. In other words, bad teeth can lead to a sick animal.

If daily brushing is not performed, plaque will form at the area where the gum meets the tooth. In time, plaque will attract calcium salts and calculus forms. The plaque and calculus irritates the gum tissue leading to gingivitis and periodontitis. Gingivitis, if treated early, can be cured. Periodontitis can only be controlled, not cured.

Do cats and dogs feel pain like us?

Many owners tell us that they did not notice any change in their animal's behaviour, so they assumed they were fine. This isn't surprising. Our pets are ultimately descended from wild animals. It does a wild animal no good to advertise the fact that it is sick, or to stop eating because its teeth hurt. Most animals simply adopt a stoic attitude to chronic pain. But if you've ever had a chronic tooth ache, you know the meaning of pain. Studies have shown that dogs and cats have pain thresholds that are almost identical to humans.

What can you do about your pet's oral or dental health?

The first step is to look in your pet's mouth, on a regular basis. Next, raise the lips and look at the teeth and gums. Note any areas of inflammation (redness), swelling, or broken teeth. Cats are especially prone to painful cavities (FORLs) which occur at the gumline. If the gums appear red or inflamed, if there's a foul odour, if you see pus at the gum line or broken teeth – see a veterinarian right away so they can assess the problem and formulate a treatment plan. This may involve a day stay in our hospital and general anesthetic for a dental scale and polish to be performed, and in some cases teeth may need to be extracted.

The longer term solution is to look after your pet’s teeth with regular brushing and checking – just like you do with your own. Brushing can be easy if you take a clean towel, wrap it around your finger, and gently rub around the gumline. The upper teeth attract the most plaque, so spend the most time there. We have pet toothpastes and toothbrushes available, as well as plaque-removing additives for either your pet's food or water. Raw meaty bones that dogs can chew on also help to remove plaque and are suitable for some dogs and cats.
**Guidelines for home dental care**

Dental homecare is preventative maintenance. It can not correct a problem once one has developed. Moreover, if there is a painful condition in the mouth, brushing will be very unpleasant for the animal and we do not want that. Therefore, a homecare program should only be started after a very thorough oral evaluation to ensure that there are no problems that need treatment prior to starting brushing.

The goal with a homecare program is to remove plaque before it becomes firmly attached to the tooth surface and before it mineralises to become tartar. Plaque will form on a clean tooth within hours and can start to form tartar within a few days. Therefore brushing daily will be far more effective than doing it two or three times a week. Likewise, any plaque-removing products need to be added to the food or water every day to be most effective.

When starting a homecare program, it is important to start slowly, letting your pet get used to each new phase before moving to the next. By introducing the program in small, easy to accept steps, and by including lots of positive reinforcement, most pets will come to truly enjoy having their teeth brushed. Take it as slowly as necessary to avoid upsetting your pet; because once they decide they like what you are doing, it will make it easier for both of you to make this part of your daily routine.

For more information about dental care for your pet, please contact us on 02 9712 5844 or email: reception@naturalvet.com.au