

From The Horse's Mouth

This column is designed to educate the community on a variety of topics relating to the health and well-being of our pets from horses to parrots and everything in between. These monthly articles are written by your local veterinarians and address regional and seasonal topics in animal health. If you have specific questions or topics that you would like covered, please email us:

Tooth and Consequences

Dogs and cats are a wonderful part of modern households and typically enjoy free reign of the home. They are excited to greet you at the door and delighted to tuck you in at night. This is a very wonderful relationship and owners are happy to reciprocate this affection toward their animals...until that horrible rotten breath seeps in. The common first reaction at this point is to head to the pet store and load up on toothbrushes and breath freshening products. The trouble is that by the time the breath is odiferous, the underlying oral disease processes are already in full force and any treatment other than dental examination and thorough cleaning is not going to resolve the issue. This article will review what a dental cleaning entails and some of the common findings and treatments that your veterinarian may discuss.

When you take your pet to the veterinary clinic, the veterinarian will listen to the heart and lungs, take a temperature, palpate the entire pet for lumps, bumps and other abnormalities, as well as examine the mouth including the teeth, tongue and gums. Dental cleaning may be recommended based on several factors, including many of the same dental conditions that humans experience such as periodontal disease/gingivitis, tartar buildup, dental caries and decaying or broken teeth. The main difference, however is that most humans DON'T tend to compulsively chew rocks or sticks, most humans DON'T tend to consume rotten or stinky substances and most humans DO tend to brush their teeth at least once in awhile. This being said, due to the simple fact that they are animals, it is likely that at some point in their life a pet will develop dental disease. We know that several factors can contribute to this, but probably the number one reason is certain breeds are more predisposed to dental disease than others. Toy dog breeds have the same number of teeth wedged into a proportionally smaller mouth. They often have significant dental disease at a younger age than larger breed dogs. Pugs, Bulldogs and even Himalayan cats (short-nosed breeds) tend to have teeth that overlap because of the shape of their head and formation of their jaws. This means food and even pieces of foreign objects can be wedged between their teeth.

So what all is entailed in a dental cleaning for your pets? Although there are some establishments that offer dental cleanings without anesthesia, they are unable to adequately clean the inside of the teeth, often unable to properly scale the molars and aren't able to probe the teeth for pockets or defects in the gums or roots. Because of this it is recommended that your pet be put under general anesthesia. Although anesthesia always has some risk to pets, modern anesthesia is extremely safe because of state-of-the-art anesthesia drugs and

monitoring capabilities. One way to predict and mitigate anesthetic risks is to ask for a pre-anesthetic blood profile which will ensure kidney and liver health prior to the procedure. Once your animal is under anesthesia the first step is to probe each tooth and root with a periodontal probe. This will identify any pockets of infection within the teeth and assess the gum line recession around the teeth. The next step is to scale the teeth. After the teeth are shiny clean from the scaling, the final step is to polish the teeth. The polish fills in any defects left in the teeth from the scaler. This treatment should sound familiar because it is precisely the type of treatment that a human dentist and hygienist perform on people!

The similarities to human dentistry usually stops there because if the veterinarian finds a bad tooth, fillings or root canals are still cost prohibitive in pets. Common practice is actually to simply remove the infected tooth rather than try to restore or replace it. If your pet has to have teeth removed- fear not! It is likely that those rotten teeth have not only been causing the foul breath, but also have been a source of pain when eating. Removing the infected teeth will remedy both problems in a short amount time, probably with the help of antibiotics and/or pain medication. This is now the appropriate point in time to load up on toothbrushes and breath fresheners, because we know the animal is free of oral disease. In fact, there is finally an FDA approved product available that has demonstrated efficacy in fighting oral disease- ask your veterinarian about this product.

Lastly it should be noted that sometimes there are more serious conditions in the mouth of a pet that can cause foul breath and painful or difficult eating. This list includes oral tumors both benign and cancerous, oral abscesses, autoimmune disease affecting the teeth and soft tissues, viral disease, and even systemic organ failure can cause foul breath. All of these conditions are addressed and treated based on a routine oral exam and dental cleaning when you bring your animal to see the veterinarian. So if your pet is experiencing any signs of oral disease, please don't wait, call your veterinarian today.

Written by Dr. Taylor P. Ludwick, M.S., D.V.M.