

Paws Up for Pets

Dental problems can signal worse health issues for pets

Welcome to February, when millions spend millions to celebrate Valentine's Day. Candy and flowers are great for your mate, but show your cats or dogs just how much you adore them by stepping up your at-home dental care on them.

Yep, February is also National Pet Dental Health Month. For decades, veterinarians have unleashed this startling stat: By age 3, more than 70% of all dogs and cats show signs of dental disease.

Yikes.

Dental woes don't just stay put in the mouth. They can also signal serious issues in the body, such as diabetes, kidney disease or gastrointestinal issues.

"If your pet is dropping food a lot, losing weight, drooling excessively or bleeding from the gums, please alert your veterinarian," says Dr. Michael Wiegand, DVM, DACVDC, a board-certified veterinary dentist who operates the Florida Animal Dentistry and Oral Surgery Center in West Palm Beach and Stuart. (www.floridaanimaldentistry.com)

Definitely do not ignore dreaded doggie breath in your canine or feline pal. It may be due to something wrong inside the mouth or in the gastrointestinal tract, Wiegand adds. Foul breath does not vanish on its own.

Regularly be on the lookout



for these other health warning signs:

- Loose or missing teeth
- Tartar buildup on molars
- Shying away from being touched on the face
- Face pawing
- Messy eating, leaving kibble scattered on the kitchen floor
- Chronic vomiting.

Adult dogs sport 42 teeth, but the size of the dog often impacts the type of dental issues they face, says Wiegand.

"The smaller the muzzle, the more prone to periodontal disease because these small dogs have 42 teeth jammed in a smaller space than big-dog mouths and food can get stuck in between their teeth."

He says large-muzzled dogs are more apt to need his dental



Veterinarian Michael Wiegand says pet owners should watch for dental health warnings such as loose or missing teeth, tartar buildup on molars and face pawing. Losing weight and dropping food may be more subtle signs. **Photos provided**

expertise for addressing broken teeth caused by chewing on bones and other hard objects like ice cubes and flying disks.

"Do the knee test before selecting a chew for your dog," he says. "If you hit the chew against your knee and it hurts, don't give it to your dog. Nylon bones and bully sticks are not good for their teeth and ice cubes can break teeth. Give your dog a chew that is pliable and has some give, such as a Kong toy that you can stuff with treats or peanut butter."

Cats have 30 teeth, 16 in the upper jaw and 14 in the lower jaw. Unlike dogs and people, cats don't get cavities because of the shape of their teeth. Their main dental issues are halitosis, excessive drooling, bleeding

from the gums and a painful condition known as tooth resorption.

"Cats do not chew food and tend to swallow whole," says Wiegand. "Tooth resorption literally means a hole in the tooth. The cat's body starts to break down a tooth and its roots and absorb them. That can cause pain and muscle spasms."

And, because cats are both prey and predator, they don't like to show any signs of vulnerability or pain for fear of being hunted, adds Dr. Lisa Radosta, DVM, DACVB, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist and owner of the Florida Veterinary Behavior Service in West Palm Beach.

If you are ready to begin regular dental care on your pet and make it struggle-free, here are some tips:

Don't be in a hurry. Initially, spend just a minute or two massaging and rubbing your cat's cheeks or your dog's muzzle. This action helps your pet get used to you touching his face. Finish by doling out a healthy treat.

"Be slow, steady and patient," says Radosta. "Teeth brushing is something completely unnatural to cats, so start by just touching the face."

Take baby steps. Do not attempt to brush all of your pet's teeth the first time. Remind yourself that the goal is to build up a positive association from your pet with brushing teeth.

"Start slowly and take lots of breaks," says Radosta. "If you have a partner to help, have the partner pet and cuddle the cat

during the process."

Dip the brush into broth. Before using pet-safe toothpaste, try dipping the bristles of a pet toothbrush or a finger brush into either tuna water or low-sodium chicken broth and encourage your pet to lick the juice off the bristles.

Get into proper position. Position yourself at the side or behind your pet's head. Hold your pet's head and lift the pet's upper lip with one hand. Then place a finger brush on the index finger of your other hand. Briefly touch the pet's gums and teeth with this finger brush and then exit. Offer a treat reward.

Start in the back. As your pet gets used to having his mouth opened and gums touched, hold the brush at a 45-degree angle on the back teeth. Move in a circular motion and slowly move toward the front teeth. Finish by delivering a treat and praise.

Here's a possible bonus benefit: Cats and dogs who become accustomed to having their teeth brushed tend to be more accepting of needed pills or liquids should they develop a medical condition.

However, if your pet still resists the toothbrush or you don't feel confident performing this task, know you have other options.

"Keep the process positive and don't force your pet," says Radosta. "Ask your veterinarian about science-based pet products that can reduce the need for brushing, such as dental chews, foods and additives. Some pets just aren't comfortable with mouth handling, and for these pets, we need alternative options to maintain their dental health."

Arden Moore is an author, speaker and master certified pet first-aid instructor. She hosts a radio show, *Arden Moore's Four Legged Life* (www.fourleggedlife.com), and the popular *Oh Behave!* podcast on PetLifeRadio.



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