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Dental Disease in Dogs and Cats

Dental disease is one of the most common medical conditions seen by veterinarians. **Over 80% of dogs over the age of 3 have dental disease.** Sometimes, dogs and cats show no obvious signs of dental disease. Other times, you may notice a terrible odor from the mouth, drooling, or decreased eating. It is important to have your pet examined annually so your veterinarian can help uncover this hidden and often painful condition.

Periodontal disease is a term used to describe infection and associated inflammation of the periodontium (the tissues surrounding the tooth). Specifically, there are four tissues that make up the periodontium. They are the gingiva, the cementum (covering of the root surface), the periodontal ligament (the ligament attaching the tooth root to the bone) and the alveolar bone. Periodontal diseases begin with gingivitis and left untreated, the infection often spreads deeper into the tooth socket, destroying the bone. Ultimately, the tooth becomes loose, painful and may fall out over time.

The mouth is home to thousands of bacteria. As these bacteria multiply on the tooth's surface, they form an invisible layer called plaque. **Plaque will thicken** with time and form **hardened tartar**, which **traps bacteria against the gumline**, making it difficult for antibiotics to reach the area, and causing gum inflammation (gingivitis). The rate at which plaque becomes mineralized is much quicker in some dogs and cats than in others.

The best way to prevent tartar build-up is through daily tooth brushing using a toothpaste that is specifically formulated for pets and is safe to swallow. Unfortunately, even though it is the best form of plaque control, most pet owners do not brush their pet's teeth daily. This is why it is **important for your pet to get regular dental cleanings** with your veterinarian. Imagine what your own teeth would look like if you never brushed them? This is what happens to your pet's teeth, and often why several teeth need to be extracted during a dental procedure.

When a pet develops dental disease, significant quantities of bacteria reside within the mouth and the oral tissues. **These bacteria can enter the bloodstream and travel** to other areas within the body, causing systemic effects. There are three organs that are especially susceptible to the spread of oral bacteria: the heart, the liver, and the kidneys. The bacteria found in the mouth of pets with dental disease are often the same bacteria found in some forms of heart disease.

What is involved with a dental cleaning?

A routine dental cleaning involves a **thorough dental examination under full anesthesia**, followed by a dental scaling and polishing to remove the plaque and tartar from all tooth surfaces. If periodontal disease is severe, **it may not be possible to save the affected teeth**. Depending on the affected tooth, extraction (tooth removal) may be the only option. Next, tooth scaling will be performed using ultrasonic cleaning equipment to remove all traces of tartar, both above and below the gum line. After scaling, the teeth are polished to remove microscopic scratches that occur during scaling. A smooth surface on the tooth is essential to prevent plaque from easily sticking to the tooth's enamel.

Why did my veterinarian pull so many of my pet's teeth?

When your pet is awake, an oral assessment cannot be complete. While they are asleep under anesthesia, your veterinarian can more thoroughly assess the viability of each tooth. **Often, dental disease is much worse than initially seen in the exam room.** Your veterinarian will use their professional judgement to decide which teeth need to be extracted. These include teeth that are loose, have tooth root exposure, severe periodontal disease, fractured teeth, or tooth root abscesses. **In a pet who doesn't get yearly dentals, this can sometimes mean that as many as 20 or more teeth are pulled!** This is not uncommon, and although it may be a shock, it is the quickest way to help reduce inflammation, infection, and pain in your pet's mouth. Often, owners will report that soon after their pet's dental extractions, their pet starts to act like a puppy or kitten again! Owners will often feel guilty that they didn't know their pet was in pain all along. We will often recommend feeding canned food for 2 weeks while your pet's mouth heals. Afterwards, their gums will heal and harden and they are welcome to eat dry kibble again. Even if your pet has had ALL of their teeth removed, they can eventually eat dry kibble if they prefer.

