

JIM HUGHES BVM&S, MRCVS

[INSERT PHOTO JIM]

Has over 20 years experience in both small animal and large animal veterinary practice and is a director of Blake Veterinary Group Ltd

Every year there is a campaign in the autumn about animal dentistry called PET SMILE MONTH. I thought that I would use this month's article to explain what it is about and why the care of your pet's teeth is so important.

Pet Smile month is a national campaign to promote better oral health in pets. Over 1500 vets will be participating this year. Ask your vet about it because if you take your pet to a participating practice you will receive a free dental consultation and a goody bag.

Dental disease is one of the most frequent ailments seen by veterinary surgeons and can be found in the majority of cats over 2 years of age and most dogs over 3. It is almost certainly as painful for your pet as it would be for you but your pet lacks the same powers of communication as us so are unable to let you know they are in pain. As a result of this it is only relatively recently that these problems have not been overlooked.

Cat's and dog's mouths are naturally very unhygienic environments, teeming with bacteria. It is this bacteria that is the root of most of your pet's potential problems

What are the most common dental diseases to be aware of?

It all starts with PLAQUE. As in humans, bacterial plaque can accumulate on the surface of the teeth, it is almost impossible to see as it forms a virtually invisible layer over the tooth and if this is not removed quickly it can become mineralised and this becomes TARTAR (often also called calculus just to confuse people) It is the bacterial products and decaying food that stick to the tartar that is one of the major causes of bad breath. Tartar is easily recognisable by its brown colour. You can normally first see this tartar at the join between the gum and the tooth and is most usually first found on the back teeth – the molars and pre-molars.

Sooner or later the accumulation of tartar on the surface of the tooth will lead to GINGIVITIS this is an inflammation of the gum. If untreated it will result in the gums receding and this will create further problems. If gingivitis is caught at an early enough stage then it is possible through professional veterinary treatment to achieve a full recovery.

If however nothing is done then eventually the gums will recede far enough to expose the root of the tooth. PERIODONTAL DISEASE is irreversible. When the root becomes exposed the cavity can then become infected which will lead to the bone and ligaments that support the tooth being destroyed. This in turn leads to excessively wobbly teeth and eventually tooth loss. To cap it all, infections may spread into and around the socket that cause the formation of pus and a foul odour, this can then spread deep into the socket and create an abscess or an even more severe problem.

Once periodontal disease starts the degenerative changes cannot be reversed. The changes then make it easier for more plaque to accumulate so more tartar will collect and finally further disease.

So what signs should I look out for ?

There are a number of common signs that could alert you to the possibility of dental problems with your pet.

- If your pet goes off its food suddenly - Your pet may approach the food bowl and then back away or be reluctant to eat
- Chewing with obvious discomfort
- Food dropping from the mouth when eating
- Difficulty swallowing
- Persistent dribbling possibly sometimes with blood
- Very bad breath
- Head shaking
- Marked weight loss

What next? What do I do if my pet has any of the things mentioned above?

Before I cover what can be done as treatment and or prevention I really want to stress what you should not do.

- Never try to remove the tartar yourself with a metal instrument from your pet! Potentially you could harm your pet's mouth. Equally importantly you will realise that you have now got your hand inside the mouth of a scared pet – I'd have a small bet that the next thing that happens is you get bitten! What will also happen is you'll probably damage the surface of the tooth by creating microscopic scratches on it and this will encourage a more rapid formation of plaque that will cause further disease.
- Never try to use human toothpaste to brush your pet's teeth. Human toothpaste is designed to foam and not be swallowed. Dogs universally hate the taste and cats can become ill if they regularly swallow it.

I suppose it should come as no surprise but the honest advice is take it to your vet – in September many surgeries are offering free dental checks and/or discounts on dental treatments if done as part of Pet Smith Month. If the vet confirms there is a need for a dental operation then it will most likely be a Scale and Polish and/or extraction. What happens when your pet is admitted for a scale and polish is as follows:-

Your pet will be put under an anaesthetic, if your pet is elderly then it is prudent that a routine blood test is carried out to establish that liver and kidney functions are satisfactory, sometimes antibiotic treatments are done before full dental prophylaxis is carried out. Your vet will discuss this with you at the time.

When your pet is under anaesthetic the tartar that is visible and that which is underneath the gum line will be cleaned using hand and ultrasonic cleaning equipment. The teeth will then be polished to help slow the future build up of plaque. Sometimes other procedures will take place whilst your pet is asleep such as fillings or extractions and even sometimes special applications such as fluoride to decrease tooth sensitivity and to strengthen enamel.

How can I prevent tartar build up?

Some cats or dogs mineralise plaque more quickly than others – each animal is an individual. If you start at the beginning specialist dental foods like T/D by Hills will help a bit. Dry foods are better because they reduce tartar build up. Then dogs can play with special chew toys but cats not so much. The next thing you can do is add special anti plaque mouthwash to your pet's drinking water. However whilst all of these things will help nothing is as good as actually cleaning your pets teeth regularly. There are special pastes and brushes that are designed for your pet. Your vet or veterinary nurse can show you how to get started on this.

Basically you should try to make the procedure as pleasurable as possible for your pet. The same principles are applicable to cats and dogs but I accept that it is harder to do with a cat. To start with you should get your pet used to the taste of the toothpaste by letting your pet lick some of your finger and it is best to start this training at the time you usually feed your pet as this is the most pleasurable time for them. Give them lots of praise when they start to lick the paste. When they are used to the taste start to put it on a brush – your vet can supply you with a specially designed brush for your pet's mouth. When they are ready – and this may take some weeks of perseverance - gently hold your pet's jaws closed and gently brush the bristles against the teeth at an angle of about 45 degrees to the teeth and gums surface. If necessary let your pet have some of its food between brushing sessions.

Most people find that their pets will tolerate the cheek teeth being brushed well before they allow you to brush the front teeth. If you have problems you should contact your vet practice and they will surely help you.

In time when your pet has got used to the cleaning of the outside of their teeth you may start to try to clean the inside of the mouth, there is a different technique for this. Whilst this next stage is admirable it is not as important as cleaning the outside.

If you don't get this far don't worry or get despondent, you can still use the special foods, toys, mouthwashes and gels that can be applied on a daily basis. Best of luck and remember if you are worried about your pets teeth September is a good time to start finding out about the free clinics your local vets may be running as part of **pet smile month**