

Dentistry Goes to the Dogs

By Lee Pickett, V.M.D.

Dogs benefit from good dental care, just as people do. Good dental habits begin during puppyhood and include a healthy diet (preferably of dry food), brushing of teeth, an annual physical examination to detect minor dental problems before they progress to major ones, and dental prophylaxis when needed. The benefits of good dental care include more than just sweet-smelling breath. Healthy teeth and gums decrease the risk of heart, kidney and liver disease, since bacteria in diseased gums travel through the bloodstream to these organs. In addition, good dental health keeps gums free from pain and reduces the need for tooth extractions.

Signs of dental disease include bad breath, gingivitis (a red gum line which may actually shrink back from its usual position), loose teeth and decreased interest in chewy foods and toys. Some pets even become lethargic as their mouths become more painful.

One of the best ways to maintain good dental health is to brush your dog's teeth. Buy an enzymatic pet toothpaste at a pet supply store or your veterinary hospital. Pet toothpastes, which come in poultry, beef, malt and mint flavors, contain fluoride plus enzymes specific to the chemistry of the canine mouth. Human toothpastes are not recommended because they are ineffective, foam too much and cause stomach upset when dogs swallow them.

Start by softening the bristles of an ordinary soft toothbrush with warm water and applying pet toothpaste to the brush. Gently brush the cheek surfaces of the incisors, the front-most teeth. Over the next few sessions, extend the toothbrush further back in the mouth, so that eventually all teeth are brushed. The cheek surfaces of the teeth build up the most plaque (since the tongue removes much of the plaque from the inside surfaces of the teeth), so brushing can focus on the cheek surfaces and your dog can keep his/her teeth together. (But most dogs love the taste of the toothpaste, so be prepared for lots of tongue action!) Tooth brushing is most effective if done daily, but every-other-day is also beneficial.

Dental prophylaxis, when needed as a supplement to brushing, is done at the veterinary hospital under general anesthesia for your dog's comfort. The crowns of the teeth are cleaned with an ultrasonic scaler, and the surfaces under the gums are hand-scaled to remove plaque that would otherwise damage the gums. The teeth are polished to achieve a smooth surface to which plaque cannot easily attach. Teeth are extracted only if necessary to protect the health of the rest of the mouth. Antibiotics are prescribed if needed, often starting a few days prior to the dentistry.