



## How to keep your Pet Smiling!

Dental disease in dogs and cats is one of the most common conditions seen by vets today. Yet with a little time and regular attention you can keep your pets' teeth clean and healthy throughout their life, and reduce the number of days your pet spends at the vet's undergoing dental work.

Temporary teeth appear at the age of 2-3 weeks in kittens and 3-4 weeks in puppies. These are replaced by adult teeth between the age of 4 and 7 months. At this time they often want to chew everything in sight – toys such as the Kong for dogs can help to save your furniture! We recommend that you handle the mouths of puppies and kittens from an early age, even rubbing along the outside of the teeth with a soft cloth, so they will be more likely to accept tooth brushing and cleaning in the future.

Normal gums should be a healthy pink colour, with no redness or bleeding where the gums meet the teeth. Some dogs or cats have dark pigment in the gums or on the tongue, which is quite normal. Teeth should be white and clean. Without regular cleaning, plaque (a mixture of bacteria, food debris and saliva) sticks to the teeth and gradually hardens to form a build-up of hard tartar. This harbours more bacteria and debris leading to inflammation of the gums. Tooth roots can become infected, causing pain and even the loss of teeth later on. There may be bleeding from the gums, your pet may have trouble eating, rub or paw at their mouth and you might notice that his or her breath starts to smell offensive! However, remember that dogs and cats can't easily tell us that they have got toothache and things can often get quite bad before becoming really obvious.

There are a variety of ways you can help to look after your pet's teeth:

- The 'gold standard' for toothcare is to brush the teeth, ideally daily, but as often as you can, with a soft toothbrush and pet toothpaste. Finger brushes (like a rubber thimble) are sometimes easier to handle than a normal brush. There are fish or poultry flavoured toothpastes which do not need to be rinsed out and appeal to dogs and cats making the experience more enjoyable. (Do not use human toothpaste as they can cause stomach problems in pets). Lift the lip and start very gently with a finger and toothpaste and finish with treats and praise. Be patient and build up the sessions very gradually beginning with just a few teeth. Use a gentle up and down motion to clean the teeth gently. It helps to have your pets back towards you. Stop immediately if there is any sign of pain, discomfort or aggression.
- Special 'dental diets' are available from vets, which have special kibbles that mechanically remove plaque and tartar.
- Dental chews can also help to clean the teeth – they are specially shaped to rub gently on the teeth while chewing, similar to tooth brushing. Do be careful to choose the right size of chew for your dog – they can damage teeth or even the jaw if they bite off more than they can chew!! Also, remember that some chews can be quite calorific, so don't solve one problem to create another in an overweight pet.
- Pet Mouthwashes can also be used to reduce the number of bacteria in the mouth – when the baby teeth come out the gums are sometimes sore and applying some pet mouthwash to the sore gums with a cotton bud can help.
- Regular dental check ups with a vet can help to pick up problems at an early stage – look out for "Pet Smile Month" in the autumn when many vets offer free dental check ups.
- Discourage your pet from carrying hard objects such as stones which can wear the teeth down. Bones are a controversial issue – they certainly can clean the teeth, but can also damage teeth and gums and cause severe problems in the guts.
- If you think your pet has bad breath or pain on eating then see your vet straight away. Dental work in pets usually requires a general anaesthetic – any damaged or rotten teeth are removed carefully and the remaining teeth de-scaled and polished, just as the dental hygienist would do for you! Sometimes it is amazing how much happier an animal is after dental work has sorted out problems with toothache and sore gums!