

Ask A Vet: Help Your Pet Take A Bite Out of Oral Disease

Sunday, January 18, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My 11 year old Rat Terrier has horrible breath and seems to lick her lips a lot. I know her teeth are bad, but I have never been able to brush them. What can be done or is it too late?

Dear Concerned Reader,

Dental care is one of the most important but overlooked aspects of maintaining a healthy pet. It sounds like you need to get her in to the vet as soon as possible. Brushing her teeth at this stage of the game will help but there are likely more serious problems that your vet will need to address. It is likely that she is suffering from a form of periodontal disease. This starts when bacteria, saliva, and food material form around the tooth and gum to cause plaque. The plaque can then take on calcium salts to form difficult to remove calcifications otherwise known as tartar. If left unchecked this plaque and tartar can eventually lead to major damage of the tooth structures, bad breath, tooth loss, and difficulty eating. In severe cases these infections can cause damage to the heart, liver, and kidneys resulting in major illness or death. It has been estimated that 80% of dogs and 70% of cats will have some level of periodontal disease by age 3. It tends to come on much quicker and reach a more severe level in toy and small breed dogs. Other common dental issues in dogs are broken teeth from chewing on hard objects, and failure to loose all their puppy teeth. Cats can often suffer from tooth resorption in which the tooth seems to recede and eventually be lost in the gum.

As is often the case in healthcare the best treatment for dental problems is prevention. There are a wide variety of dental related chews and treats on the market today, and many of these are useful products. However, they do not take the place of brushing your pets teeth. When you get a new puppy or kitten get him used to having his teeth examined and brushed. Use a tooth brush, finger brush, or gauze and be sure to use tooth paste formulated for pets. Try not to make the experience overwhelming for your pet right away, but be persistent, use treats, and soon they will be used to it. It is never too late to start brushing your pets teeth, even if they are older. Yearly dental exams may help identify problems early before they get severe. As pets age they often need to have their teeth professionally cleaned and scaled by your veterinarian. This is usually a quick procedure done under general anesthesia. It also allows your veterinarian to do a more thorough examination and perform any procedures needed. If you fear your dog or cat is already having problems, it is never too late. It is sometimes difficult to tell how much discomfort your dog or cat is in until a problem is resolved. I have often heard he is just like a puppy again after doing dental work on an older dog.

Next month happens to be National Pet Dental Health Month. Take part by incorporating dental care into your pets life so you can avoid painful and costly health issues for them in the future.

-Dr. Justin Sellon