

As a veterinary clinician one of my jobs is to make recommendations to people regarding their pet's health care. One very common recommendation I make is for pet owners to have their pet's teeth cleaned. Keeping up with a pet's dental and oral health can help prevent painful dental disease and tooth loss, not to mention some really bad breath. Additionally, if not caught at an early stage, dental disease can propagate major illnesses in other systems of the body. Many people understand my concerns about their pet's health and follow through with the recommended dental procedure. Some on the other hand seem quite hesitant, and I'm not sure why in every case. I've made a short list the reasons some pet owners give me for not having their pet's teeth cleaned. Let's take them one at a time and see if I can put some of these reasons to rest.

1) "The procedure requires an anesthetic, and anesthesia scares me"

No doubt about it, to clean an animal's teeth correctly they need to be anesthetized. I wish we could clean pets' teeth without an anesthetic. The problem is dogs and cats have this rather predictable response to someone trying to work in their mouth. At best they don't like it and resist your efforts, and at worst they give you a painful reason to not try it again. In addition to the removal of visible tartar from the teeth, a true dental cleaning also involves cleaning the sensitive sub-gingival areas of the teeth (below the gum line), x-raying and possibly removing diseased or potentially problematic teeth, and checking for other dental or non-dental oral disease. In fact, just cleaning the visible tartar off the teeth is only a small part of a dental cleaning. Sure we enjoy the pretty white smile and the fresh breath a good cleaning provides, but that's just the cosmetic part. Simply stated, anesthesia allows us to do the work that needs to be done. If you have concerns about your pet being anesthetized, share this with your pet's doctor. Ask what measures are taken to assure as safe an anesthetic as possible. Of course, there will always be a small risk with any anesthesia. The most important point here is that with modern anesthetic protocols, the risk of a brief anesthesia to clean the teeth should be less than the long-term risk of untreated dental disease. In other words, try to compare the risks of doing a dental cleaning to the risks of not doing a dental cleaning.

2) "It costs too much."

OK, good point, dental cleanings are not cheap, but think about what we just addressed in the previous section. You want the anesthesia for your pet to be as safe as possible. So we try our humanly best by using modern anesthetic drugs along with advanced monitoring and patient support systems. Additionally, modern dental instrumentation and highly skilled technicians allow the dental procedures to be done correctly and in a timely manner, thus reducing anesthesia time and improving patient safety. Unfortunately, none of this comes cheap. Bottom line, if you keep your pet's dental problems in check you may very well avoid a major health problem, as well as a major vet bill down the road.

3) “The doctor may have to extract some teeth and it might affect my pet’s ability to chew and eat”.

Understand that many dental cleanings involve no extractions at all. When teeth are extracted it’s only if they are already loose, severely diseased, or causing other oral cavity problems. In most cases we are extracting teeth that the pet is probably not using much anyway. It’s rare for extractions to affect an animal’s ability to eat. In the case where a pet loses a large number of teeth over time, softer foods may need to be added to the menu. I’ve seen dogs with no teeth do just fine. Remember, it’s better to extract a problem tooth than to leave it in and risk painful dental problems.

4) “What’s a little bad breath?”

Well if you must know, that smell is caused by, among other things, bacterial growth in the tissues around the teeth. The best analogy I can think of is the smell of rotten food-you got it-bacteria doing their thing. Enough said.

5) “Animal’s teeth don’t need dental cleaning because well, they’re animals after all.”

True, animals in the wild don’t get regular dental care. It’s also true that animals in the wild probably don’t live nearly as long as their domestic counterparts. The vast majority of America pet owning families consider their pet “a member of the family”. Why then wouldn’t we want to give them the best chance for a long healthy life? Why shouldn’t we take advantage of modern advancements and knowledge to help a beloved family member?

Remember, good health for your pet doesn’t happen simply because you pick the right diet, give the right vaccinations or select a good veterinarian. Rather, good health is the cumulative result of a multitude of small things you do for your pet that give him/her its best shot at enjoying life to its fullest. Dental care is no doubt one of those “small things” that can add to the quality as well as the quantity of your pet’s life.

Dr. John Huebner practices companion animal medicine at Redwood Veterinary Hospital in Vallejo, CA. You can send your pet health questions to Dr. Huebner at 731 Admiral Callaghan Lane, Vallejo CA. 94591, or e-mail him at jvhuebner@earthlink.net.