

Dental Care FOR CATS

Is it really worth it?

BY MARCIA KING

The idea of getting a toothbrush into your cat's mouth a few times a week is probably pretty off-putting. And you might wonder, are toothbrushing, at-home dental care, and professional cleaning really worth all the time and effort?

EXTENDING QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF LIFE


Just as with humans, feline dental care offers far more than a sweet smile and fresh breath. It's actually an important component for good overall health and for quality of life, says Susan Little, D.V.M., Dipl. ABVP, president of the Winn Feline Foundation, an international, non-profit organization that funds research for feline health projects.

First, proper dental care can help prevent oral disease. Two of the most common diseases seen in cats are gingivitis/stomatitis (inflammation of the gums or mouth) and feline odontoclastic resorptive lesions (FORLs or "cavities"). "FORLs are painful and lead to tooth loss," says Dr. Little, who owns and practices at Bytown Cat Hospital in Ottawa, Ontario. "Gingivitis/stomatitis can lead to chronic inflammation, pain and decreased appetite."

According to Dr. Little, when teeth are neglected, periodontal disease develops. As a result, bacteria from the mouth may travel through the rest of the body, possibly leading to an increased risk of systemic problems, such as kidney or heart disease.



Believe it or not, cats need their teeth brushed for the same reasons people do.



Regular dental exams are the best way to ensure your cat's mouth is in tip-top shape.

and correct other dental problems and to remove any tartar buildup).

AT-HOME CARE

"Plaque is bacteria that colonizes on the tooth surface in as little as 6 to 8 hours," says Steven E. Holmstrom, D.V.M., Dipl. AVDC, a practitioner at the Animal Dental Clinic in San Carlos, California. Plaque is caused, in part, from food debris that accumulates on the teeth. "If it isn't removed by brushing, the bacteria will die in three to five days and become calcified bacteria—calculus or tartar. Another layer of bacteria grows on top of this and continues the cycle," Dr. Holmstrom says. Once formed, tartar can only be removed by a professional dental cleaning.

The most effective means for controlling plaque is brushing the teeth. "Tooth brushing disrupts the plaque that adheres to the tooth, especially along the gumline," explains Gary J. Spodnick, D.V.M., Dipl. ACVS, chief of surgery at the Veterinary Specialty Hospital of the Carolinas in Cary, North Carolina. "A variety of pet toothpastes are available, but the most important thing is not what brand is used to brush the teeth, but that the teeth are brushed. The mechanical action of brushing is most effective at removing the plaque."

It's important, however, to use a toothpaste designed especially for pets, and not a human brand. That's because unlike humans, who spit out the toothpaste, pets swallow the toothpaste; human toothpaste could cause stomach upset.

You can probably control plaque by brushing every three days, but the most successful brushers, Dr. Holmstrom says, are those who brush daily. "It's much easier to establish a habit if you do something daily."

Dental diets and dental chews can also help reduce plaque, but they should be used in conjunction with tooth brushing, not as a substitute for brushing. Dr. Holmstrom notes, because dental diets and chews are not as effective as brushing.

"Dental diets are formulated so that as the kibbles are chewed, the teeth penetrate into the kibble without the kibble shattering or breaking into smaller pieces," Dr. Spodnick says. "This provides an abrasive, auto-brushing effect, which helps remove the plaque from the surface of the teeth."

Dental chews work in much the same way as dental diets—by removing soft deposits of plaque from the surface of the teeth. "The drawback with chews is getting the cat to chew them with all tooth surfaces," Dr. Holmstrom says.

PROFESSIONAL CARE

Tooth brushing goes a long way in keeping your cat's teeth healthy, but your cat should still receive a dental checkup as part of its yearly physical to look for signs of dental disorders. Sometimes an owner will see clinical signs of a dental problem (odor, bleeding, pain, or difficulty eating or chewing), but often, these symptoms don't become an issue until the problem is

Getting Started

Although it's usually easier to begin tooth brushing with a kitten rather than an adult cat, most adult cats can be coaxed into tolerating tooth brushing.

Steven E. Holmstrom, D.V.M., Dipl. AVDC, a practitioner at the Animal Dental Clinic in San Carlos, California, thinks there are two methods of introducing tooth brushing: "You can get the family or neighborhood together and fight the cat—which will not work—or you can work on brushing on the cat's terms!"

Start out using something flavored that the cat really likes. "It could be a toothpaste or even juice from water-packed tuna," Dr. Holmstrom says. The toothpaste is not important—it's the brushing action that's important. Put the toothpaste or tuna juice on the toothbrush and rather than attacking the cat with the brush, just offer it to your cat. Let it lick the brush perhaps five to six times a day.

"When the cat sees this as treat time, you can start brushing," Dr. Holmstrom says. "At first, this isn't very effective. The cat is trying to lick and you are trying to brush. But don't restrain your cat: It will get better with time!"

One caveat: When introducing tooth brushing to an adult cat, do so after an oral exam and professional dental cleaning. "This allows for treatment and healing of any pre-existing dental problems that could be painful during brushing," Dr. Holmstrom says.

—Marcia King



CRIS KELLUM/REX BREED

Professional cleanings must be performed under general anesthesia to keep the cat still during the procedure.

quite advanced. Your cat's veterinarian should be able to spot a minor dental problem before it becomes major dental problem.

Some of the common dental disorders your veterinarian will look for include periodontitis, gingivitis, FORL, oral tumors and stomatitis. Treatment depends upon the condition and the severity of the disease, but can include dental cleaning, extraction, surgical excision and medications.

Periodically, your veterinarian will recommend professional cleaning of your cat's teeth for the same reason that your dentist cleans your teeth on a regular basis—to remove the plaque and tartar from the little crevices and pockets that a toothbrush misses.

Current feline health guidelines recommend having your cat's teeth professionally cleaned at least once a year. If your cat has chronic dental problems, it may need to have its teeth cleaned more often.

FOR HEALTH'S SAKE

When it comes down to it, feline teeth are not that different from human teeth. If you've ever suffered a loose tooth, broken tooth or another tooth problem, you know how miserable they can be.



CRIS NELLUM/IMMEDIATE BREED

When first introducing tooth brushing, allow your cat to lick the toothpaste off the brush without actually attempting to brush its teeth. Gradually, start brushing a few teeth at a time as your cat learns to tolerate it.

The same goes for your cat. It just makes sense to help reduce the risk of these painful occurrences in your feline friend by staying on top of budding dental disorders through routine dental care. A clean and healthy mouth will make your cat feel great, too. ▼

What's a Professional Cleaning Like?

Scaling and polishing feline teeth is not much different than what we humans experience during our routine dental cleanings, but unlike human cleanings, cats and other animals must be anesthetized for their dental procedures. Conscious animals won't be quietly compliant while someone pokes around in their mouths for an hour.

Although protocols for dental procedures vary from patient to patient, and from vet to vet, pre-anesthetic bloodwork and a complete physical examination is typically recommended in order to assess your cat's health, explains Susan Little, D.V.M., Dipl. ABVP, who owns and practices at Bytown Cat Hospital in Ottawa, Ontario. These precautions help ensure that your cat is otherwise healthy to undergo anesthesia.

Prior to your cat's dental procedure, you'll be asked to withhold food for several hours. "Most veterinarians recommend withholding food from cats for about eight hours before anesthesia, but not withholding water," Dr. Little says. Withholding food minimizes the chance of vomiting while the cat is anesthetized.

An IV catheter will be placed into your cat's vein to deliver anesthetic drugs during the procedure. The catheter also serves as a port for providing emergency drugs, should the need arise, and for administration of IV fluids during the procedure—IV fluids help maintain blood pressure, preserve hydration and provide internal organ support.

During the procedure, the veterinarian typically charts the teeth, noting if any teeth are missing, diseased or damaged. "The depth of the gingival sulcus [the crevice

that surrounds the tooth] should be measured around each tooth," says Gary J. Spodnick, D.V.M., Dipl. ACVS, chief of surgery at the Veterinary Specialty Hospital of the Carolinas in Cary, North Carolina. "Deep gingival pockets allow for greater accumulation of plaque and calculus, and accelerate the process of tooth loss."

After the charting, the teeth are "scaled"—that is, plaque and calculus are removed from the tooth surface using hand instruments and power scalers—then polished with a dentifrice (a paste, powder, gel or liquid). "Polishing removes small scratches or etches on the surfaces of the teeth left by our instruments as well as small deposits of plaque and calculus that were not effectively removed during the scaling process," Dr. Spodnick explains.

The time needed to perform a cleaning and any required treatments varies according to the problem. "More extensive disease requires upwards of an hour or more for satisfactory treatment, especially if dental extractions are required," Dr. Spodnick says. Depending on your cat's treatment, your veterinarian may prescribe the use of oral antiseptics and antibiotics.

"Generally, dental prophylaxis is a safe procedure," Dr. Spodnick notes. "Perhaps the most concerning and potentially life-threatening aspect of the procedure is general anesthesia. Older patients should have screening bloodwork and even chest X-rays to assess cardiac condition." The anesthetic plan should consider any concerns regarding your cat's health.

—Marcia King