

Open Wide!

Practice at-home dental care now to keep Kitty out of the dentist's office later.

By Roxanne Willems Snopek

Teressa Tompkins could smell her Siamese's breath from the other end of the couch. "Cola's breath has never been her best point," says Tompkins, "but this was ridiculous." When Teressa also noticed that Cola was avoiding the food dish, she realized the bad breath might be signaling a more serious problem.

A veterinary examination revealed a badly diseased canine tooth and extensive calculus on Cola's other teeth. A week after the offending tooth was removed, Teressa saw Cola's appetite return; best of all, her breath no longer cleared the room!

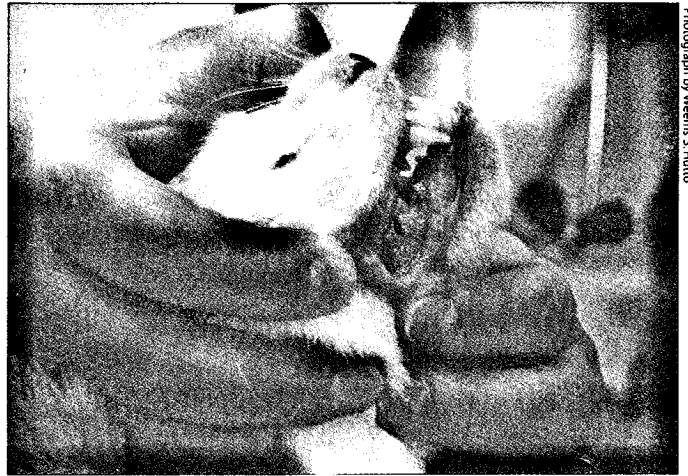
As the life expectancy of cats increases, veterinarians are spending more time educating owners on the importance of good dental care. A cat with strong, healthy teeth is well equipped for a long, healthy life. A cat with tooth or gum disease can develop a host of related problems. Laura LeVan, DVM, of Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine in North Grafton, Massachusetts, says, "Among veterinarians there is common belief that by the age of 2, most cats have some degree of periodontal disease. By the age of 5, most need immediate treatment."

The Dirt on Plaque and Gum Disease

What exactly is plaque? This filmy coating is made up of a combination of bacteria, sugars, food and oral debris. In wild cats, it's removed naturally each day by the act of chewing and ingesting raw, rough-textured food. Commercial diets don't do as good a job of providing this service, and without home care, plaque accumulates in as little as 24 hours. After a few days, this film of plaque mineralizes into hard calculus that can only be removed mechanically. Once calculus deposits begin to accumulate, they cause irritation and inflammation of the gums.

Cats are not as vulnerable to developing tooth decay or cavities as humans are. Much more common is gingivitis, or inflammation of the gums and supporting tissues of the teeth. If treated, gingivitis is reversible. Left untreated, it can progress to periodontitis, in which the supporting ligaments and bone, as well as the gums, become inflamed. Periodontitis eventually results in tooth loss. According to the American Veterinary Dental Society, more than 70 percent of cats older than three years have some degree of gum disease.

Many owners don't recognize the early signs of gum



Photograph by Weems S. Hurto

Keep those pearly whites sparkling and healthy for years to come by remembering to schedule dental examinations annually.

or periodontal disease. Some cats will have problems chewing hard food; others will paw at their mouths. But unfortunately, most will show no signs. The only clue for many owners is what Teressa calls "dragon breath," which should never be ignored.

Professional Cleanings Are a Must

The first step to proper dental care, says Dr. LeVan, is to provide regular dental examinations. "Annual dental exams are important," she says, "and cleanings should be done as needed. Some animals need it every three to four months; others every three to four years." Most cats will experience their first dental cleaning between the ages of 3 and 5. Although 7 years seems to be the "magic age," at which many veterinarians start recommending dental care, Dr. LeVan warns that this may be too late.

Fraser Hale, DVM, Diplomate of the American Veterinary Dental College, operates a specialty dental referral practice at the Royal City Animal Hospital in Guelph, Ontario. He advises owners to educate themselves about the services offered by their veterinarian. There's a difference, he says, between a "dental" and a thorough oral examination and hygiene procedure. "I have a strong conviction, supported by client feedback, that what I am doing is making pets much happier and healthier," says Dr. Hale. "I've treated many patients for whom the alternative was euthanasia. Bringing them back to a good quality of life is very gratifying."

THE FULL TREATMENT

When your cat is undergoing a medical procedure, "no surprises" is always the best policy. Fraser Hale, DVM, diplomate of the American Veterinary Dental College of the Royal City Animal Hospital in Guelph, Ontario, explains the process of dental treatment for felines, from beginning to end.

- 1. Physical Examination:** "The mouth is attached to a cat," says Dr. Hale, "so the primary focus must be the whole animal." Treatment should start with a full physical examination and history of your cat's health and lifestyle. Be sure to mention whether your cat is an indoor or outdoor cat, what he eats, any recent changes in his behavior. Be sure to mention any reluctance to eat dry foods or drink cold water. Your cat's overall health will affect his ability to tolerate the anesthetic necessary for treatment, as well as his response to the treatment itself.
- 2. Oral Examination:** "Many (but not all) cats will allow the veterinarian to take a good, close look in the mouth without the aid of sedation," says Dr. Hale, "provided the veterinarian proceeds slowly and gently." A visual examination of each tooth, the tongue, gums, palate and back of the mouth will allow the veterinarian to assess the degree of dental disease present.
- 3. Pre-operative Interview:** The veterinarian will discuss any findings of the oral examination with you before proceeding any further. Often, various options are available. Be sure you understand the risks and merits of each, and make the best decision for your situation. A detailed estimate of the fees involved should also be provided at this time.
- 4. Anesthesia:** A professional veterinary dental cleaning always requires general anesthesia. Your cat will be given an injection of sedating drugs, and then a tube will be placed in his throat through which anesthetic gas and oxygen will be administered. The tube has an inflatable cuff that prevents fluid from trickling down into the throat. His temperature, breathing and heart rate will be monitored and recorded throughout the procedure.
- 5. Radiographs:** X-rays provide additional information about the root and supporting bone of each tooth. This information is essential for accurate assessment and the development of an appropriate treatment plan.
- 6. Calculus & Plaque Removal:** Dr. Hale starts by rinsing the cat's oral cavity with antiseptic solution in order to lower the bacterial count and reduce the risk of infection prior to manipulating tissues. "I then generally begin the process of gross calculus removal," he says, "by removing the large chunks of mineral deposits on

the teeth. This allows me to see the teeth and gums better." He looks for inflamed or receding gums; periodontal pockets; and broken, missing, deformed or extra teeth. The crowns and any exposed root surfaces of teeth are cleaned above and below the gum line, using hand instruments, mechanical and ultrasonic scalers, or a combination of these tools.

Hand-scaling provides access to surfaces not easily reached by mechanical devices, and can be gentler on the teeth and gums than are other methods. However, it is time consuming, and requires a longer time under anesthesia. "It's crucial to recognize," emphasizes Dr. Hale, "that the tartar on the crowns of the teeth is not the real problem." It's far more important to remove deposits from below the gum line. "That is the stuff," he says, "that will cause periodontal disease."

- 7. Extractions:** Any teeth that cannot be saved are removed at this time. Dr. Hale uses local anesthetic, in addition to the general anesthetic, in order to prevent post-operative pain. He adds, "I also recommend suturing all extraction sites to prevent contamination with bacteria and food."
- 8. Polishing & Flushing:** A pliable rubber-tipped instrument is used to apply a fine-grit polishing paste to smooth enamel surfaces following scaling, making it more difficult for plaque to adhere. The mouth and gum line are flushed with water, then rinsed a final time with antiseptic solution.
- 9. Recovery:** Close observation is necessary during recovery from anesthesia. Once a cat is awake and able to stand and walk on its own, it can be returned to the ward to await discharge.
- 10. The Discharge Interview:** Close communication between owner and veterinarian is always important. Dr. Hale discusses radiograph results with his clients and gives them a copy of the cat's dental chart, a written synopsis of findings and treatment, and very detailed, clear post-operative instructions. A follow-up visit may be scheduled at this time, and you will be able to begin a regime of maintenance dental care at home shortly thereafter.

Dr. Hale warns owners not to start a home teeth-cleaning program until the cat has had a thorough oral examination by a veterinarian. "If you accidentally poke a sore spot, your cat may never again give you a chance to look in his mouth!"



Photograph by Laura Lohan, DVM

The Feline Dental-Care Supply Closet

Laurie Miller of Boulder, Colorado, knows the importance of dental home care. Seven-year-old Citaborea (aerobic, backwards) has a problem with severe plaque build-up. "Rather than have frequent, expensive teeth cleanings that would require anesthesia each time," she explains, "my girl has trained me to brush her teeth three or four times each week."

At the same time each night, Citaborea jumps up onto Laurie's bed and waits for "tooth-time." Laurie uses a special tooth brush and paste made just for cats. Using one hand, she holds her cat's head from the back of the neck, pulling on the fur near her jaws just enough to open her mouth a bit. With the other hand, she brushes each tooth as well as possible. "It only takes a few minutes," says Laurie, "and it's been a great help in keeping Citaborea's teeth white and plaque-free."

Not all cats are as compliant as Citaborea, but with gentle persistence and the right tools, you can care for your cat's teeth at home, too. Various pastes, gels, sprays, rinses and powders are available, flavored with such delights as fish, poultry or even malt! Some veterinarians recommend rinsing solutions that contain enzymes to enhance feline saliva's natural antibacterial activity. NEVER use human toothpastes or baking soda in a cat's mouth; they can be dangerous, and cats dislike the taste. Fluoride toothpaste additives are very harmful when swallowed, and while humans "spit out" after brushing, cats do not. Judy Rochette, DVM, FAVD, Diplomate AVDC, a dental specialist in Burnaby, British Columbia, says "My cats like the CET Forte seafood flavored gel." She recommends starting out by putting a dab of toothpaste on a favorite treat to create a positive association.

Don't Force the Issue

Teach your cat to allow you to touch and examine her muzzle. Pet and rub her face, without retracting the lips,



Photograph by Laurie Miller

Special pastes, rinses and brushes are available at most pet stores. Human tooth pastes should never be used in a cat's mouth.

and praise her when she submits to this without complaint. Once this type of handling is allowed, gently retract her lips, again giving positive reinforcement when she allows you to do so. If you encounter resistance, back up to the previous point and go more slowly. The next step is to put a dab of toothpaste on her canine, or "fang," tooth and let her lick it off. Repeat this on the other side, and then give her a reward. "Do this, and only this," says Dr. Rochette, "for about a week, or until she stops resisting."

Once the handling and the toothpaste are accepted, it's time to add the brush. Various brushes, including tiny finger brushes (they look like finger puppets) are available for dental care at home. "Don't start brushing motions yet," cautions Dr. Rochette. "Just the prickle of the bristles from placing the toothpaste in the mouth will be a new feeling for your pet." Once the brush is accepted it's time to start actually brushing, but don't expect to do as thorough a job as you would on your own mouth.

"The vast majority of tartar will form on the outer (cheek) side of the teeth," says Dr. Rochette. "Therefore, it's not as critical to brush the inner (tongue) side." Enzymes in the toothpaste mix with the saliva and provide a benefit, even if the brushing isn't perfect. "Anything you do is better than nothing at all," emphasizes Dr. Rochette.

Tufts' Dr. LeVan regularly educates cat owners on home care, and practices what she preaches on her own cats by brushing their teeth every morning. "They expect it," she says. "They run to the bathroom door when they hear the shower stop, ready to have their teeth brushed." She adds that a few treats after brushing go a long way toward making dental care a positive experience.

When teeth are healthy we don't even notice them. But when they are painful, that pain interferes with every aspect of our life. The same goes for your cat's teeth. Give her a chance at having a long and happy life without tooth pain and without any need for extensive (and expensive) dental work—start practicing dental care at home on a regular basis. 🍀