

# It's Not Just 'Doggy' Breath....

## Dental Care Tips for Canines

When I was a young child, my parents made sure I brushed and flossed my teeth twice daily and that I saw a dentist twice a year. Dental hygiene and oral health were considered extremely important in my family. However, we never thought twice about our pet's teeth. Foul breath and tooth loss were considered a natural and acceptable part of a pet's aging process. Times have certainly changed! As pets have evolved into more integral members of the family, veterinary medicine has become more sophisticated and knowledgeable in the specialized area of animal dentistry. We now recognize the significant pain and health risks our pets can potentially endure if they suffer from periodontal disease.

### A Serious Health Threat

Periodontal disease refers to a chronic bacterial infection in the mouth. As this disease advances, tartar builds up on the teeth, gums recede, abscesses and pockets of infection form, and ultimately bone infection and tooth loss occur. As the animal's gums become more inflamed, bacteria from the infection can enter the bloodstream. These "bacterial showers" can affect the kidneys and/or heart valves of the animal.

### Genetically Speaking

There is a strong genetic component to the development of periodontal disease. Some dogs and cats never develop the condition. However, most will at some point in their lives. Daily brushing, chewing toys and rawhides, dental sprays and washes, and some foods help to slow the advance of dental disease. Still, even with all preventative measures, most animals require

veterinary dental cleaning to maintain good oral health. The frequency of these cleanings may vary. My own dog requires cleaning once a year.

### Preventative Measures

Veterinary dental cleanings are outpatient procedures. Animals are admitted in the morning and can return home in the evening. Plaque is removed from the surface of the teeth with an ultrasonic dental scaler. A dental pick is used to remove tartar from between teeth and from below the gum line. Then the teeth are polished. The procedure is almost identical to the human dental cleaning. However, there is one significant difference: Animal dentistry is performed under general anesthesia, since our pets will not just lay still and open wide while dental procedures are being performed. Once the teeth have been cleaned and polished and fluoride has been applied, we then apply a gel film across the surface of the teeth and gum line that slows down the recurrence of tartar in pets, as well.

### Alleviating Anesthesia Anxiety

Clients often express concern about the safety of anesthesia. Current anesthetic protocols are much safer today than they were when I was a child. I tell my clients that if their animal has normal blood values, normal heart sounds, and no history of significant health problems, the risk of anesthetic complication is actually lower than the risk of developing heart or kidney disease from dental infection. Now that you know the facts about dental health, you can be on the alert if your pet breathes in your face and you're tempted to back away! Your canine companion may have a serious health problem. Don't hesitate-see your veterinarian.