

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS DENTAL CARE**

### **DO YOU HAVE TO PUT MY PET UNDER USING ANESTHESIA TO PERFORM DENTAL WORK?**

In order to appropriately diagnose and treat your pet's oral disease, sedation or general anesthesia is usually necessary. Safety is our number one priority. Animal Samaritans designs an individualized anesthesia protocol based upon the results of preoperative laboratory tests, the specific oral disease being treated in your pet, and any connected health condition (i.e., heart, kidney or liver disease) your pet may have.

### **WHEN ARE ANTIBIOTICS INDICATED FOR DENTAL PROCEDURES IN ANIMALS?**

Following routine dental scaling, the majority of patients will experience transient bacteria in the blood stream. In healthy animals, their immune response is effective at eliminating bacteria from the bloodstream and resulting in the rapid decline of bacteria without the use of systemic antibiotics. For animals with underlying systemic disease (heart, liver and kidney), that are immune compromised and/or have severe oral infections, antibiotics are indicated. These moderate and high risk patients should receive antibiotics 1 hour before their dental procedure.

### **OUR DOG HAS A FRACTURED TOOTH AND DOESN'T SEEM BOTHERED BY IT, DO WE REALLY NEED TO HAVE IT TREATED?**

Yes, especially if the internal portion of the tooth or pulp is involved. The pulp of the tooth contains the blood vessels and nerves of the tooth. Teeth with pulp exposure are painful. When the pulp of a tooth is exposed, bacteria can enter into the tooth and infect the pulp. Often, there are no notable outward symptoms (facial swelling) until very late in the course of the infection. Because the infection is localized at the root tip (tooth root abscess), and since the tooth root is hidden from view within the jaw bone, the classic sign of facial swelling is not seen until the infection has worked its way through the jaw bone overlying the root.

### **WE WERE SHOCKED THAT OUR VETERINARIAN RECOMMENDED TOOTH EXTRACTION FOR OUR PET, WHY AREN'T THERE OTHER TREATMENT OPTIONS?**

When periodontal disease is left untreated, tooth loss becomes a reality for many pets. Many clients are shocked that their family veterinarian has advised extraction for a compromised tooth. At face value, this indeed may seem drastic. When detected at the severe stages of periodontal disease, where significant amounts of bone and soft tissue have been lost along the roots of the tooth, the options for saving teeth are extremely limited, and tooth extraction is often the only course of action to restore oral health. If the diseased tooth is not treated or extracted, neighboring teeth may be compromised.

### **IS DENTAL SCALING PERFORMED ON ANIMALS WITHOUT ANESTHESIA A SUITABLE ALTERNATIVE TO PROFESSIONAL PERIODONTAL THERAPY?**

Adult pets often have established periodontal disease. In some of these pets, especially older pets, periodontal disease has progressed beyond its early or mild stages (gingivitis). The moderate and severe stages of periodontal disease traditionally require various therapies (periodontal and oral surgery) in addition to dental scaling. When scaling is used as a standalone treatment to address all stages of periodontal disease, especially when used as the only therapy for the treatment of severe periodontal disease, it is purely cosmetic and non-therapeutic.

Pet owners naturally are concerned when anesthesia is required for their pet. However, performing dental scaling on an unanesthetized pet is inappropriate for the following reasons:

1. Dental tartar is firmly adhered to the surface of the teeth. Scaling to remove tartar is accomplished using ultrasonic and sonic power scalers, plus hand instruments that must have a sharp working edge to be used effectively. Even slight head movement by the patient could result in injury to the oral tissues of the patient, and the operator may be bitten when the patient reacts.
2. Professional dental scaling includes scaling the surfaces of the teeth both above and below the gingival margin (gum line), followed by dental polishing. The most critical part of a dental scaling procedure is scaling the tooth surfaces that are within the gingival pocket (the subgingival space between the gum and the root), where periodontal disease is active. Because the patient cooperates, dental scaling of human teeth performed by a professional trained in the procedures can be completed successfully without anesthesia. However, access to the subgingival area of every tooth is impossible in an unanesthetized canine or feline patient. Removal of dental tartar on the visible surfaces of the teeth has little effect on a pet's health, and provides a false sense of accomplishment. The effect is purely cosmetic.
3. Inhalation anesthesia using a cuffed endotracheal tube provides three important advantages – the cooperation of the patient with a procedure it does not understand, elimination of pain resulting from examination and treatment of affected dental tissues during the procedure, and protection of the airway and lungs from accidental aspiration.
4. A complete oral examination, which is an important part of a professional dental scaling procedure, is not possible in an unanesthetized patient. The surfaces of the teeth facing the tongue cannot be examined, and areas of disease and discomfort are likely to be missed.

#### **HOW OFTEN SHOULD I GET MY PET'S TEETH PROFESSIONALLY CLEANED?**

Most domestic pets can benefit from annual professional dental cleanings performed under general anesthesia. In particular cases, a more frequent treatment interval may be necessary. A proper assessment of your pet's oral health should include an oral examination and dental x-rays (radiographs), either full-mouth (all teeth) or regional (particular teeth of interest), under general anesthesia.

#### **WILL MY PET BE ABLE TO EAT NORMALLY, ENJOY DOGGIE BISCUITS AND BONES AFTER HAVING EXTRACTIONS?**

In general, dogs and cats manage extremely well following extractions, but for our patients' comfort following extraction(s) we recommend a soft food (can or water-soaked kibble) diet for the first 2 weeks postoperative. After this immediate postoperative period has passed, most pets resume their normal preference of diet. Many pets with severe dental disease have been suffering silently with low-grade chronic pain for years, and following extractions, many clients report an improved quality of life and vigor in their pet.

#### **WHEN SHOULD I START DENTAL CARE WITH MY PET?**

The earlier the better. Your veterinarian can teach you how to care for your pet's teeth and gums early on as well as how to keep an eye out for indicators of dental problems. Starting early is especially important for the small breed dog population. Small breed dogs are especially prone to periodontal disease. For their size, small dogs have relatively large teeth for their jaws, resulting in crowding and an unfavorable environment where plaque and tartar can readily accumulate between teeth, thereby exacerbating periodontal disease.

## **HOW CAN I TELL IF MY DOG OR CAT HAS GUM DISEASE OR OTHER DENTAL PROBLEMS? WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?**

Start with some of the basics:

- Does your dog or cat have bad breath?
- Does your pet shy away from you when touch their mouth area?
- Does your pet drool excessively or drop food from his or her mouth?
- Have you noticed any bleeding from your pet's mouth?
- Have you noticed a loss of appetite or weight loss (this combination can result from diseases of many organs, and early veterinary examination is important).

If your pet will allow it, gently open its mouth and look inside. Look for the warning signs of gum disease – red and swollen gums, a yellow-brown crust of tartar around the gumline, and pain or bleeding when you touch the gums or mouth. Also look for discoloration and tartar or missing, loose or broken teeth.

Seek veterinary care if you notice any of these problems. Dental disease progresses in stages -- if caught early, you can prevent further damage and save as many teeth as possible. A professional examination will determine whether a cleaning or other dental work is required.

## **MY PET HAS BAD BREATH OR A CHIPPED TOOTH. IS IT REALLY A BIG DEAL?**

Just like with humans, infected gums and teeth aren't just a problem in the mouth for dogs and cats. Your pet's heart, kidneys, lungs, intestinal tract, and joints may also become infected. The tartar and any infected areas of the mouth contain a multitude of bacteria than can 'seed' to other parts of the body. Providing your pet with regular dental care will help prevent some of these more serious side effects.

## **HOW DO I BRUSH MY PET'S TEETH AT HOME?**

To brush your pet's teeth you must train your pet gradually over several weeks. Small dogs and cats are most easily done when they are sitting on a table, counter or your lap. Larger dogs can be sitting on the floor. Especially when you first begin, it may take two people to get the job done, but be careful not to over-restrain your pet -- keep brushing sessions short and positive. One person can hold your pet and the other can actually do the brushing. Praise and reassure your pet throughout the process, and don't forget to provide a treat or reward afterwards!

Here is an example of how to get your pet used to having their teeth brushed gradually:

Step 1: Dab a bit of flavored toothpaste from your local pet store (typically these come in flavors like chicken or beef). Don't use toothpaste designed for humans because it could upset your pet's stomach. Rub the "flavored" finger gently over the pet's mouth and teeth. Make the initial sessions short and positive.

Step 2: Gradually, introduce gauze over the finger and gently scrub the teeth and gums in a circular motion.

Step 3: Finally, you can introduce a soft toothbrush designed for pets. Special pet toothbrushes are available from your veterinarian or at pet stores.

If your pet won't cooperate with home brushing or if you already see brown tartar stains on its teeth or red and bleeding gums, it's time to turn to your veterinary dentist for help. Your pet will be given general anesthesia and have their teeth cleaned above and below the gum line to

remove plaque and tartar. After the teeth are cleaned, they will be polished to remove microscopic plaque and to make the teeth smooth to discourage plaque from clinging.

Remember, dental care is as important to your pet's health as it is to your own. You owe it to your pet to provide regular dental care and cleaning.

#### **HOW OFTEN SHOULD I BRUSH MY PET'S TEETH?**

Ideally, you should brush your pet's teeth daily. Brushing less frequently than three times per week is not productive and other methods of decreasing plaque and tartar accumulation should be used such as specially-designed dental diets, treats, barrier sealants, antiseptic rinses, gels and water additives.

#### **HOW MANY TEETH DO DOGS AND CATS HAVE?**

Dogs start out with 28 deciduous (baby) teeth, cats start out with 26 deciduous teeth. By six months of age, these baby teeth fall out and are replaced by permanent teeth, 42 in the dog and 30 in the cat.

#### **ARE THERE CERTAIN DIETS AND TREATS THAT CAN IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF MY PET'S TEETH?**

Specially-designed dental diets and treats can help to retard plaque and tartar build-up between your pet's dental cleanings and may even extend the interval between cleanings. Not all products with a dental claim on their label, however, are as good as others and it is important to be an informed consumer of veterinary dental products. An independent organization, the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC), awards a Seal of Acceptance to veterinary dental diets and products that meet a pre-set standard in plaque and tartar reduction in animals. A listing of products awarded the seal is available on the VOHC website ([www.vohc.org](http://www.vohc.org)).