Bye-Bye Doggy Breath -- Dental Care for Dogs

According to the American Veterinary Dental Society (AVDS), eighty percent of dogs and seventy percent of cats have periodontal disease by the age of three! Alarming statistics? Yes, and it is known that proper dental care could increase their life by two to five years. Dental care in dogs and cats has become quite common over the last six years. The AVDS has even selected February as National Pet Dental Health Month. Like humans, dog teeth and gums are also susceptible to the same oral health problems - Gingivitis and Periodontal disease. Unlike humans, animals rarely get cavities. This is because cavities are primarily caused by the high sugar content of the human diet. Periodontal disease affects both human and mammals alike. Periodontal disease is caused by bacteria and plaque which attach the soft gum tissue of the mouth. The first stage of periodontal disease is gingivitis. This is very common. In this stage, the bacteria have mixed with saliva and formed plaque. The plaque adheres to the teeth and hardens, forming tartar and calculus. These tartar deposits irritate the gum tissue and cause inflammation, swelling and infection. It is this stage that gingivitis is most notable. Early warning signs of gingivitis are sensitive gum tissue, redness or bleeding gums, trouble eating/chewing and bad breath. Yes, the dreaded "doggy breath"! The breath may take on a sulfur (rotting eggs) odor from the by-products of the bacteria in the mouth. This is often the first sign of gingivitis and serious dental problems. If caught at this stage, gingivitis is treatable. A thorough dental exam and cleaning most likely will be needed. Many dogs will also most likely need to be put under anesthesia. (This presents its own series of side-effects and dangers as well.) If gingivitis is not treated, it will progress to periodontal disease. Periodontal disease is not treatable. At this stage, there is irreversible bone loss and tooth damage. Roots are also weakened and the animal may experience loose teeth and teeth that simply fall out. Animals may also begin to lose weight. This can lead to other problems associated with improper nutritional intake. Dental treatment will be needed and may result in the extraction of teeth. Again, this will need to be done under anesthesia. Additionally, the bacteria and infection in the mouth may spread through the bloodstream to cause heart, kidney or liver disease. These diseases can cause serious damage to the organs and lead to premature death. Periodontal disease is preventable. Like with humans, dogs need regular dental care. The first step is to have your pet examined for existing problems. If needed, your veterinarian can do a dental cleaning. Next, develop an at-home dental care program including a proper diet and mix of dry and wet foods. Diet alone can not prevent dental problems. Most sources recommend brushing the teeth with pet toothpaste on a gauze or small pet toothbrush. This is the optimal program. If you choose to do this, be sure to select a toothpaste made for pets, avoid fluoridated products and pastes with sugars as one of the top ingredients. Brushing or even wiping the teeth with gauze will be a learning and training experience. With dogs, the process is estimated to take between 8 to 16 weeks before the animal is comfortable with the experience. Start slowly and build each day. A more practical option for many pet owners may be an oral hygiene solution. There are now pet oral hygiene solutions on the market that can be added to pets' drinking water. These are much easier and more convenient to use and are formulated for animals. Owner compliance with these programs, unlike with daily brushing, is much higher. As the pet drinks, the solution works to repel and retard the plaque and eliminate the bacteria and bacteria by-products. They are odorless and colorless. Another helpful "trick" is to try one of the healthy dental treats on the market. They help remove the forming tarter. Be sure to check the label for ingredients -- some treats are really "tricks" in that they contain sugars, dyes and other questionable substances. Once an at-home program is established, be sure to follow-up with regular veterinary exams.

About the Author

Contains a guide to the House, plus information on officers and political groups, and a list of all members.

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