



Paw Prints

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Columnist

The importance of dental health

You just got back from a yearly routine exam for Fido, and your vet told you that it's time to start brushing your 3-year-old collie's teeth. To top it off he gave you a soft doggie toothbrush with special toothpaste just for dogs. He showed you the simple steps of how to brush your furry friend's teeth, and explained to you how proper maintenance of Fido's teeth could be a lifesaver in the long run.

According to the American Veterinary Association, oral disease is the number-one health problem in dogs and cats, with 85 percent of dogs 5 years or older having periodontal disease. And it's alarming when you realize that unhealthy teeth spread infection and disease to other parts of the body like the heart, and can cut a pet's lifespan by five years.

Periodontal disease develops when food particles and bacteria collect along the gum line and form soft deposits

called plaque. Whenever your pooch eats, bits of food and bacteria collect around the gum line and form plaque. Over time, the plaque turns into rock-hard tartar. Tartar irritates the gums and results in inflammation, called gingivitis. Your dog's gums will turn from a healthy pink color to red, and you may notice some bad breath. If the tartar isn't removed it will accumulate under your dog's gums, eventually pulling the gums away from the teeth and creating small open spaces, or pockets, which are collection points for even more bacteria. If the problem progresses to this point, your pooch has developed irreversible periodontal disease. At this point, your dog can experience severe pain, lose teeth, form abscesses in his mouth and could develop a bacterial infection that can spread through the bloodstream to the kidneys, liver, heart or brain.

How quickly plaque, tartar and gum disease develop in your dog's mouth depends on a number of factors including his age, overall health, diet, breed, genetics, and the care his teeth receive from both you and your veterinarian.

Since periodontal disease is irreversible, now is a great time to get started on a regular oral-care regimen for your pooch.

So brushing your furry friend's teeth isn't just about fresh breath. It's an essential part of good oral care, and good oral care is important to your dog's overall health. If you start brushing your pet's teeth as a puppy you

can prevent them from getting periodontal disease as an adult, and that will save you costly dental bills.

Gum disease in dogs has been linked to canine heart disease. A study, conducted by Dr. Larry Glickman at Purdue, examined the records of nearly 60,000 dogs with some stage of periodontal disease and about 60,000 without, and revealed a correlation between gum and heart maladies.

According to Glickman, their data showed a clear statistical link between gum disease and heart disease in dogs. The correlation was even stronger when it came to endocarditis, or inflammation of the heart valves. In the dogs with no periodontal disease, about 0.01 percent were diagnosed with endocarditis, compared to 0.15 percent of the Stage 3 periodontal disease dogs.

While studies clearly show a significant link between periodontal disease and heart disease in both humans and dogs, exactly how one leads to the other isn't yet well-understood. Researchers suspect, however, that the culprit is bacteria in the mouth which enters the bloodstream. Mouth tissue, known as oral mucosa, is rich with blood vessels which hasten the speed at which bacteria can enter your dog's bloodstream and travel throughout his body.

If your dog has periodontal disease, the surface of his gums is weakened and compromised. The breakdown of gum tissue is the door through which mouth bacteria enters

her bloodstream. And if your furry friend's immune system doesn't kill off the bacteria circulating in her blood, it can reach his heart and infect it.

It's ideal to brush your dog's teeth daily, just like you brush your own. However, if your schedule doesn't allow that, aim to brush his teeth at least several times a week.

Of course the best time to start is when he is a puppy, it's easier for him to get used to having his teeth brushed, but grown dogs can learn to become comfortable with getting their teeth cleaned also.

You can get a doggie toothbrush and toothpaste at any good pet-supply store. Do NOT use regular human toothpaste for your pooch. Most human toothpastes include fluoride, which is extremely poisonous to dogs. And since dogs don't rinse, even without fluoride the paste is not meant to be digested.

With some dogs it may not be so easy, and if the tooth brushing ends in blood, sweat, or tears, there are still choices you can make to help improve your dog's oral health. Crunchy kibble is better for our furry friend's teeth

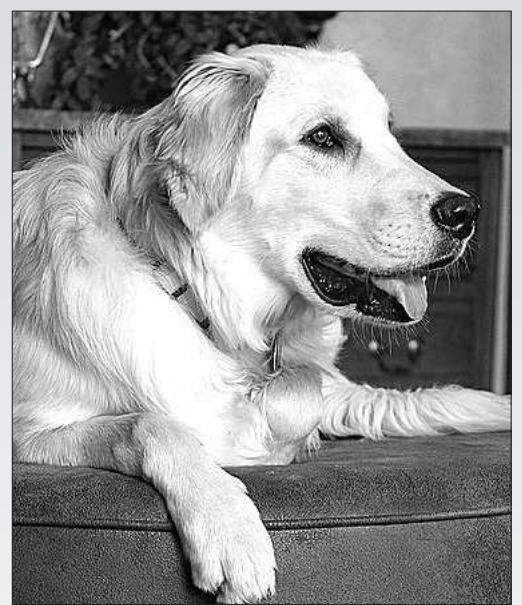


PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

A dog smile is something you have to work on.

than soft food, as soft food is more likely to stick to the teeth and cause decay. There are many synthetic bones and chew toys that are specially designed to strengthen your dog's gums and teeth. Giving your dog a good specially made bone to chew on can help rid buildup and keep teeth strong.

Even with healthy teeth, just like you, your dog should have his teeth checked by your vet every six to 12 months.

Dental care can be a pain in the neck for humans and dogs, but proper maintenance can be a money-saver in the long run, and even a lifesaver. Letting it go can lead to costly and often painful vet visits down the road. Keep your dog's mouth clean, and you'll both be smiling!

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