

Ask A Vet: Maintaining Your Dog's Pearly Whites

Sunday, January 31, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Is it really necessary to brush my dog's teeth? Can't I just use dental treats or water additives to keep their teeth clean?

Dear Reader,

As a veterinarian, one of the most common problems I find on examination is some form of dental disease. Although it does take time and effort to do consistently, brushing your pet's teeth is probably the number one most important thing you can do to prevent this. Diseased teeth and gums are often very painful and reduce the quality of life of our pets. This process happens over time and often goes unnoticed to the pet owner who doesn't bother to look in their pet's mouth.

Periodontal disease also creates terrible breath which undoubtedly can affect the relationship we have with our pet. Imagine how bad our teeth would be if we never brushed them once? The argument could be made that brushing your pet's teeth is every bit as important as feeding good nutrition or having them vaccinated.

In order to make brushing tolerable for both you and your pet, it takes some conditioning to the process. This is most easily done when your pet is young, but can be accomplished in older pets as well. The most important thing to remember is to go slow at first and try to make it a positive experience. First allow your pet to taste the toothpaste. Most toothpastes made for pets will have flavors they enjoy. Focus on brushing just a few teeth at a time. Don't be too forceful as the gums will be sensitive to start. Use 8-12 oval strokes to cover the focus area, making sure to get some action on all the upper and lower molars. If your pet is resistant it may help to reward with treats periodically.

Equipment needed for brushing is usually minimal. Selecting a good toothbrush is important since the mechanical action on the tooth is really what makes brushing effective. Bristles are ultra soft and the head is usually small. Small dogs and cats may only need a finger brush which is often less intimidating for them at first anyway. For larger dogs with different shaped mouths choose a toothbrush that allows you to easily access all the way to the back of their molars. Toothpaste for pets comes in a variety of flavors and often contains a disinfectant and breath freshening agent. Do not use human toothpaste because the fluoride can give pets an upset stomach

If you have the time to brush your pet's teeth daily that is wonderful, but reality is most of us do not. If you can do it three times weekly or even once weekly it will likely still knock plaque off before it has had a chance to completely mineralize. If your dog has a lot of tartar and heavy calculus it is a good idea to have them professionally cleaned and examined by your veterinarian. After that you can hopefully start fresh and take more of a preventative approach by brushing regularly.

Finally, there are countless products out there making claims to help prevent and treat dental disease in pets. Some are decent, but unfortunately many are worthless. The bottom line is nothing takes the place of the thorough mechanical action brushing provides.

-Dr. Justin Sellon