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## UNTREATED, BAD BREATH CAN LEAD TO DENTAL DISEASE IN DOGS, CATS

"Pets Need Dental Care, Too" is the theme for February's National Pet Dental Health Month campaign.

Dental disease is the most commonly diagnosed health problem in dogs and cats. So February has been designated as a time for veterinary professionals and pet owners to renew their commitment to year-round pet dental care.

Bad breath — "dog breath" — is not normal for dogs or cats. The odor is most often caused by the build-up of bacteria on the teeth and in the gum tissues. Left untreated, the first stage, called "gingivitis," meaning inflamed gums, will progress to more painful and irreversible disease. Gingivitis is recognized by a puffy, red gum margin that may bleed more easily.

The good news is that gingivitis is treatable and reversible. Yes, a professional teeth cleaning is required and, yes, an anesthetic is necessary to do that properly.

Very rarely is the risk of anesthesia greater than the risk of leaving dental disease untreated. Infection around the tooth, called "periodontal disease," is painful and that infection has far-reaching consequences. Heart disease, kidney and liver impairment and high blood pressure can be caused by dental problems.

Cats have a particularly nasty dental affliction called "resorptive lesions." These are cavity-like holes in the teeth that develop just below the gum line. They are extremely painful and can cause the crown of the tooth to break away. Nearly 30 percent of all cats develop at least one of these during their lifetime.

Symptoms of oral disease may be very subtle in some patients and quite obvious in others. Things to watch for include decreased appetite or decreased activity, bad breath, drooling, swallowing food whole, bleeding gums, swelling of the face, yellow-brown crusty teeth and tooth loss.

Since nearly 80 percent of dogs and cats over the age of 3 have some form of dental disease, what can a conscientious owner do to help?

Step 1 is to have a professional dental exam. Let your veterinary health care team assess what your pet's oral health level is. If a dental cleaning/evaluation is recommended, have it done.

Step 2 is establishing a home dental care routine. By far, the best routine is daily brushing. There are more convenient options, but none as effective as brushing. Use your veterinary team to select products and customize a program. But stick to it, and not just in February.

For more information about this topic, visit [www.petdental.com](http://www.petdental.com).

Until next month, healthy pets, happy people.

Dr. Pat Mahoney is the owner of American Animal Hospital in Neenah, an AAHA certified pet care clinic. To submit pet-related questions for a future column, go to the email link at [www.ameranimal.com](http://www.ameranimal.com).