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Dental Health

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Oral disease is the most frequently diagnosed health problem in dogs and cats. It is estimated that pets develop tartar five times faster than humans and dental disease is far more serious than just bad breath or even losing teeth. Next month, February, is National Pet Dental Health Month, a time to raise public awareness of the importance of pet dental health. This is such an important topic that we're going to use two monthly columns discussing pet dental disease.

Bad breath is not normal for cats and dogs. Though there are other diseases that cause breath changes, the usual cause is the build-up of bacteria on the teeth and in the gum tissues. The bacteria can cause infections of the gums and tissues surrounding the teeth leading to inflammation, bleeding, discomfort, and eventual tooth loss.

"Gingivitis," literally meaning "inflammation of the gums," is the very first stage. It is recognizable by a puffy, reddened gum margin that may bleed easily. This is a reversible stage and the ideal time for us to really help your pet. Stages 2 through 4 periodontal disease are increasing levels of bone loss and gum recession. As the infection follows into the bony socket of the tooth the bacteria often enter the blood stream, and the organs that filter the blood are susceptible to infection and damage. Heart murmurs, kidney and liver disease, and high blood pressure can all result from untreated oral infections.

A particularly nasty form of dental disease occurs in cats and is called an FORL. Feline Odontoclastic Resorptive Lesion - a mouthful to say, but quite common and extremely painful. These 'lesions' may look like a cavity, but they are not caused by bacteria like the common cavities that do occur in dogs and people. This is an erosion of the enamel that starts at the neck of the tooth where the crown meets the root. This process progresses into the very tender dentin underneath and then into the pulp chamber where the nerve and blood supply are located. As opposed to dog cavities, the then inflamed nerve does not die back, but becomes even more angry and painful and may actually protrude from the erosion. "Ouch!" Eventually the weakened tooth crown may break off leaving the pulp tissues exposed. An FORL may be the most painful problem that can happen for a cat. These are so uncomfortable that an otherwise anesthetized cat may still react

painfully to probing an FORL. It is estimated that nearly 30% of cats develop at least one of these during their lifetime.

So if nearly 80% of dogs and cats over the age of 3 years 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/oral evaluation is recommended, have it done! In almost all cases, the risk of anesthesia is far less than the risk of leaving advancing dental diseases untreated. Step 2 is establishing a home dental care routine, which we will discuss next month.

"Pets Need Dental Care, Too" is the theme for February being National Pet Dental Health Month. Please visit www.petdental.com for more in-depth information about this so very important topic.

Until next month, healthy pets, happy people! Dr Pat Mahoney

Dr. Pat Mahoney is the owner of American Animal Hospital in Neenah, an AAHA certified pet care clinic. To submit your pet related questions for a future column, go to the e-mail link at www.ameranimal.com