

Paw Prints #7 Feb '07
Dental Health Month part 2
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So now that it's time to have those teeth cleaned, do we have to anesthetize your pet? Yes, a general anesthetic is required to clean the teeth of dogs and cats. Cleaning underneath the gum-line is critical to successfully completing a dental prophylaxis. Prophylaxis is shorthand for prophylaxis, "measures designed to preserve the health and prevent the spread of disease" per Webster's Collegiate dictionary.

There are 7 steps in a properly performed dental prophylaxis procedure and the removal of tartar above the gum-line is only one of those steps. It is possible to just crack the heavy tartar accumulation off the cheek side of the teeth in an awake patient. That process would leave a roughened tooth surface that actually facilitates the re-growth of plaque bacteria and the reformation of tartar even faster. The pocket below the gum-line not only on the cheek side, but also between the teeth and on the tongue side too must be cleaned, polished, flushed, and probed. It is in that pocket that the disease process starts and where the bacteria and waste toxins enter the blood stream as well. To gain full access to these areas with the instruments needed, a pet must be anesthetized.

So isn't the anesthetic risky and expensive too? Yes and no. The risk of anesthesia can be greatly reduced by careful prescreening and individual evaluation of each patient. Pre-anesthetic exams and blood panels as well as modern gas anesthetics, IV fluids and antibiotics, and monitoring devices have tremendously improved the safety of veterinary procedures. The risk of anesthesia versus the benefit of treatment should be discussed with your veterinarian on an individual basis. It is rare that the risk of anesthesia would be greater than the risk of leaving untreated dental disease! This concept is counter intuitive and an understandable common concern posed to veterinarians, but none-the-less very true. Especially the elderly patients with pre-existing heart and or kidney problems can't afford the increased daily burden of the bacterial shower and toxins from untreated oral diseases.

The cost of professional dental care for a veterinary patient may indeed seem expensive at first glance. People don't need to be anesthetized for a routine prophylaxis but our pets do. Competent, trained and caring staff

must be paid, modern well-maintained equipment must be provided, and a safe, clean warm environment is needed for a day stay. Veterinary medicine is provided at truly a bargain fee. But since pet health insurance is not common yet in this part of the country, the dollars do come out of pocket in most cases.

Routine and early intervention can cure gingivitis and arrest the progression of periodontal disease. It is not only less expensive to prevent and treat early, but these procedures can dramatically improve the quality and quantity of a pet's life. So if the teeth need cleaning, get it done! Then work with your veterinarian to help keep those teeth clean and those gums healthy!

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