

THE IMPORTANCE OF DENTAL HEALTH CARE

Dental care has saved the lives of more pets than any other advance in veterinary medicine in the past 15 years. Does that statement surprise you? It's true. The life expectancy of dogs and cats that receive dental care is 10-20% longer than those that don't. For some pets, this may mean as much as five years!

Dental disease is painful, in pets as well as in people. For pets with periodontal disease it is also eventually fatal, leading to kidney and heart failure, liver and lung disease, and contributing to arthritis and skin disease. Taking care of your pets' teeth is one of the kindest and most important things you do for them. Remember, if you choose to have a pet it is your responsibility to prevent pain and suffering by that animal. There is no difference between untreated dental disease and an untreated broken leg. If your pet was dragging a broken leg around the house we surely hope you would bring it to your veterinarian for treatment! Infected teeth are no less painful or debilitating. If lack of dental care for dependant children or elderly relatives can land you in jail for neglect, which it can, surely it cannot be acceptable for pets either.

You can think of bacteria in the mouth being like termites eating away at your house, until it eventually falls down! If you look at tissue sections of the liver, kidneys or lungs of an animal with long standing dental disease, you will see thousands and thousands of "microabscesses." Each is the result of a single bacterium traveling through the bloodstream from the mouth, lodging in the tissue, and then multiplying to form a small colony. The immune system recognizes each infection and sends white blood cells and scavenger cells to combat it. Usually the bacteria are killed, but each microabscess damages some tissue in that organ. **Since millions of bacteria enter the blood stream every time a pet with periodontal disease chews or eats**, eventually those millions and millions of microabscesses destroy the tissues where they form.

As well as organ damage, the end stage of periodontal disease causes the jaw bones to be infected, the breath to be foul, the gums and lips to ulcerate and the teeth to fall out. The heartbreaking thing for veterinarians when they see this in a pet is that it was all entirely preventable. The pet has suffered for months or years before it reached this point.

We are sad to say that the people who most need to read this article are probably not doing so. They saw the words "dental care" and didn't go farther because they've already made up their minds that it's nonsense and veterinarians are just trying to take their money. Or they go to a clinic where it's cheap and where they don't have to listen to the veterinarian tell them things they don't want to hear. Good quality veterinary clinics are not about taking advantage of people or their money. They believe in helping their patients in the best way they can. Those of you who are taking the time to read this are probably the ones who care most about your pets and want to learn how to take care of them better. You are the ones who make veterinary staff member's jobs worthwhile, and are more than likely already letting us perform dental cleanings for your pets. (And we thank you!)

If dental care for your pets stretches your budget, many clinics would be happy to set up a payment plan for you or let you leave held checks, especially if you are a regular client and have paid your bills on time in the past. If you have questions or worries about anesthesia, the age of your pet and the safety of dental procedures, or the need for

extractions or other treatments, give your pet's doctor a call. **Whatever else you do for your pet, consider the addition of a dental health care program. It's one of the most important things you can do for your furry family members.**