

Don't Forget Pet Dental Health

The AVMA offers tips for keeping your dog's teeth healthy as part of National Pet Dental Health Month.

Posted: February 10, 2007, 5 a.m. EST

February is National Pet Dental Health Month, sponsored by the American Veterinary Medical Association. But according to the American Dental Association, almost 80 percent of adults brush their teeth at least twice a day, while many completely ignore the dental health of their pets.

More than 80 percent of dogs show signs of oral disease by the time they're 3 years old, said Brook Niemiec, DVM, an American Veterinary Dental College Diplomate.

"Make sure every veterinary checkup includes a thorough inspection of your pet's teeth and gums, and a discussion on how to keep them healthy and clean between visits," Niemiec said.

Among the other AVMA tips and information on how to keep your pet's teeth healthy: Look for signs of tooth decay and oral disease by inspecting your pet's teeth regularly. Bad breath, discoloration and tartar are all indications of problems that could lead to serious health risks with the potential for not only damaging teeth and gums but internal organs. Regular visits to your veterinarian should include a complete checkup of your pet's teeth. Your veterinarian should clean plaque and tartar off your pet's teeth if necessary. When tartar — created by the mixture of food debris, saliva and bacteria in the mouth — is allowed to build up, it can accumulate between teeth and gums causing tooth loss, and result in an infection that could enter the bloodstream and spread to the heart or other internal organs. Brush your pet's teeth daily or at least weekly. While most dogs or cats will not immediately accept a dental hygiene regimen, it can be successfully introduced with patience, particularly if you start when the pet is young. To acclimate your pet to dental health, start slowly using plenty of praise and treats. Begin at a time when your pet is relaxed and massage the outside of their mouth with your finger. Then give him a taste of pet toothpaste — poultry-flavored is among the most popular — and slowly introduce a toothbrush to their teeth. Begin brushing in short intervals, working up to about 30 seconds a side. Dogs don't accumulate as much tartar on the outside of their teeth as they do the inside, so focus your dental hygiene attention there. Feed your dog or cat crunchy food, or at least a mix of hard and soft foods. The abrasive texture of kibble can help keep teeth clean, while soft food can cling to your pet's teeth and lead to decay. Also consider crunchy treats, which also help clean teeth. Chew toys for dogs and rope toys that cats can chew are not only immensely entertaining for your pet, but also keep teeth clean and breath smelling fresh.

For more information on pet dental health, visit www.petdental.com