

ASK THE VET

Dental Disease

By: Rose DiLeva MD, MS, CVCP, CA

QUESTION:

Last month I had the opportunity to meet you when I took my 10 year old dog to your Animal Wellness Center for a consultation. He had been slowing down lately and I wanted him checked out well. My Charlie was seen by my conventional veterinarian just 5 weeks earlier for his vaccinations. When you examined Charlie you determined that he had severe gingival and periodontal disease along with severe tartar and plaque on his teeth. Can dental disease develop to that extent in just a few weeks? Why did the other veterinarian not mention this to me?

ANSWER:

I cannot comment on why Charlie's dental disease was not previously addressed (but I will anyway). Obviously, I have to maintain a professional repoir regarding the "skills" of some of my colleagues. As with any health care profession, you have the good, the bad, the exceptionally great and what I consider the "greedy unethical." Those of you reading this magazine are much more likely to search out the good and great practitioners, not only for yourselves, but for your pets. This is the most beneficial option to choose. Remember, you as the consumer, have every right to ask to see diplomas, attendance of continuing education, and check with the professional organizations they are members of to ensure that they are in good standing. Please, do it. It is your right, and in this day and age of questionable healthcare, ask for that proof and don't be afraid or intimidated by anyone trying to dissuade you otherwise. If you don't see proof of the qualifications he or she claims to have, then move on to someone else. It is your legal right. Research, ask questions and find the best in the field for what you are looking for.

Examination of the oral cavity should be a part of all routine physical examinations. The American Veterinary Dental Society states that greater than 70 % of cats and 80 % of dogs develop periodontal disease by the age of three. Periodontal disease can be seen in pets in different degrees. Gingivitis, which is an inflammation of the gums; plaque, which is bacteria that develops from food particles that adhere to the outer surface of the tooth; and calculus, which occurs when plaque becomes mineralized and adheres to the surface of the teeth. This is why food that is eaten by your pet and stays on the teeth, even in very small quantities, over time can cause inflammation of the gums, bacterial growth and hard calculus. Other signs of dental disease are bleeding gums, bad breath, grinding or "chattering" of teeth when trying to

eat, eroded, broken or blunt ended teeth, increased drooling (especially cats), reluctance to eat or play with toys, even lethargy and depression.

In order to accurately examine teeth, the upper lip needs to be raised and pulled towards the back of the mouth to properly visualize the upper and lower molar and premolar teeth. They are considered the "cheek teeth" because of their location. They are the teeth that are most likely to get infected and abscessed because this is the location where food tends to sit and essentially decay. Unless this is properly done, serious infection can start and continue for months to years before it is noticed. Good dental care ideally begins at home when your pet is young and is monitored professionally by your veterinarian at annual check-ups. In my opinion, one of the most important preventative actions a pet owner can take is to be aware of dental hygiene and learn how to brush their pet's teeth. This is easy to get your puppy or kitten use to when they are just a few months old. Studies have shown that brushing your pet's teeth regularly can extend their life by up to three years! Brushing at home will also reduce the number of times your pet needs to be anesthetized to have their teeth cleaned. Brushing will also eliminate that "doggie breath" that occurs over time that is the result of periodontal disease.

Left untreated, gingivitis will progress to more severe periodontal disease that causes oral pain and allows bacteria to enter the bloodstream and damage other organs such as the kidneys, heart, intestines, joints and liver. Continued lack of treatment can lead to organ failure, sepsis and death.

Correctly performed, a complete dental cleaning and scaling for your dog or cat involves anesthesia. As such, it is important to get pre-dental blood work to ensure that all organ systems are functioning correctly to minimize anesthetic risk. There are a number of different types of anesthesia that are very safe. The oldest cat I have performed a dental procedure on was 22 years old; the oldest dog was 19 years old. Frequently, pets are put on antibiotics to reduce the infection prior to and after the procedure. Most pets go home the same day of the procedure.

One last and very important fact you need to know. Any kind of dental procedure should be done only in a veterinary hospital. I have heard stories of people in "veterinary related" jobs claiming and making the client pay for a "dental cleaning." Scraping plaque off of a pet's teeth with one's finger nail or other instrument does NOT qualify as a correct procedure. If anything it will stir up the bacterial infection in the mouth and could lead to systemic infection and organ damage.

Dr. Rose DiLeva is a 1987 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's school of Veterinary Medicine. She practices alternative and conventional veterinary medicine. Dr. DiLeva is a certified veterinary acupuncturist and a certified veterinary chiropractor. She can be reached at her Animal Wellness Center in Chadds Ford, Pa. at 610-558-1616 for appointments, speaking engagements and telephone consultations. Her web site is www.altpetdoc.com.