AMC
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ANIMAL MEDICAL CENTER

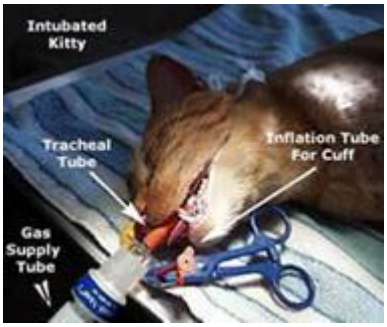
The Importance of Dental Care for Dogs and Cats

Part 3 of a 3 - part series by Stephen Riback, DVM

Like people, our pets are prone to dental disease. This month focuses on the importance of controlling and preventing dental disease in our cats and dogs. Untreated dental disease is associated with both infection and pain. Recent studies in people and dogs show that untreated infection in the mouth has also been linked to disease in other parts of their bodies.

An Explanation of Dental Costs and Preventative Care Tips for the Pet Owner

Pet owners often ask “why is veterinary dentistry so expensive?” It's true that over the past several years there has been a change in veterinary dental fees. This is a direct result of the advance in technology made available to practice the safe anesthesia and treatment necessary to provide the highest quality veterinary dentistry. The good news is that with this new technology, we can provide much better quality oral care for our pets, allowing them to live healthier and happier lives.



All dental procedures should be performed under general anesthesia. Safe anesthesia starts with prescreening to determine the overall health of a patient. This includes a comprehensive physical examination, blood tests and sometimes other tests such as chest x-rays, echocardiograms or electrocardiograms. Anesthetic drugs and the administration and monitoring of pets undergoing dental procedures have become very sophisticated, which allows us to anesthetize high-risk and older patients with a higher degree of safety. While a patient is under general anesthesia, several vital signs are monitored to ensure the patient is tolerating the anesthesia well. Monitoring often includes an electrocardiogram and measuring blood oxygen, expired carbon dioxide and blood pressure. The prescreening process and administration of anesthesia is quite similar to the process used in human medicine.

Through the use of intraoral digital x-ray technology we are able to diagnose dental disease that was previously undetectable. Many veterinary practices now use digital or computerized x-ray imaging. This eliminates the need for dental films and the slow process of developing x-rays by hand. Now, a digital sensor is placed in the patient's mouth and the image shows up on a computer screen seconds later. The amount of radiation necessary for digital images is only a fraction of what was used for film x-rays. Intra oral radiography is the single most important tool for the diagnosis of dental disease.

Many veterinary dental practices are now using “high speed” drills in oral surgery. This allows us to more easily treat and extract teeth as well as perform many oral surgeries. As a result of all the advances in veterinary dentistry, we have an increased ability to treat the dental disease that is present with higher degrees of sophistication. All of this adds to an increased cost of care, but with a greater return on your investment, with pets that seem to feel much younger, happier and more energetic after being treated for dental disease.

With our increased knowledge of dentistry, we are now capable of diagnosing and treating a much wider variety of dental disease. These new therapies allow us to save teeth in many instances and help lessen the degree of oral pain. Some of the procedures that are commonly performed include endodontic therapy (root canal therapy) for broken or dead teeth, advanced medical and surgical techniques for treating periodontal disease, orthodonture for animals whose natural bite might be causing oral pain, newer techniques for the treatment of jaw fractures and the placement of crowns on working dogs with fractured teeth.

Part of every pet’s examination should include an oral evaluation. In the awake patient, only a limited view of the mouth is obtained, but often good enough to determine if an anesthetic exam and dental cleaning should be performed. The veterinarian is often looking for evidence of halitosis (bad breath), calculus or tartar on the teeth, gingivitis, periodontitis, broken teeth, loose teeth, decay of the teeth, etc. Any of these changes warrant an anesthetic evaluation and treatment.

Preventive dental care at home should include daily brushing of the teeth. Brushing less than once a day has been shown to have little positive benefits on the prevention of dental disease. There are now diets and chews approved by the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC). The VOHC seal of approval certifies that a dental diet or product will decrease plaque and tartar accumulation on teeth. Annual oral exams performed by your veterinarian can help screen for dental disease and annual prophies are recommended to minimize plaque and tartar build up. Keeping the teeth clean is the best way to prevent periodontal disease and keep our pets healthier and happier.

AMC Dentists:

Dr. Dan Carmichael

Dr. Stephen Riback

Dr. Django Martel