

DON'T LET BAD BREATH AFFECT YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR PET.

August is pet dental health month and is therefore a good opportunity to address one of the most common problems affecting dogs and cats today. In humans, tartar builds up if we do not remove it by brushing. Likewise in animals, tartar builds up if it is not removed by chewing on raw bones or other gnawing toys, or by brushing.

When tartar is not removed it develops into calculus, which is the visible hard, yellow mineral buildup. Then the gums recede from around the teeth, and other supporting structures for the teeth are weakened, leading to tooth infections and tooth loss. This process is called periodontal disease and is the cause of your pet's bad breath.

Apart from tooth problems, periodontal disease also affects general health. Bacteria are released into the bloodstream through the inflamed gums and can lodge in places like the kidneys and heart valves, causing problems in these sites. Therefore, mouth health is important for your pet's overall health and longevity.

While raw chicken wings are suitable for cats and small dogs, larger dogs need shin and shank bones, which most butchers can cut to the required size for you. Avoid cooked bones as they tend to splinter and can puncture the gut. Some cats prefer the chicken on the bones cooked a little, so you can quickly sear them under the grill.

While most dogs love bones, cats need to be trained to eat them from an early age. Feed your kitten the wing tips, and progress to the entire wing as they grow. Chicken necks are also suitable. Offer your puppy small bones, too. Even though all animals have baby teeth that they will lose as they grow, it is important to encourage bone-chewing behaviour from an early age.

Yes, you can also brush your pet's teeth. There are flavoured toothpastes containing enzymes that help break down plaque and kill bacteria, although the mechanical removal of tartar is the aim. Do not use human toothpastes, as these are not designed to be swallowed and can irritate the stomach if ingested. There are also various gels and liquids that contain the same sort of ingredients, and are an alternative if your pet disagrees with having its teeth brushed! Again, it is much easier to train your dog or cat to allow toothbrushing from an early age. You only need to clean the outside surface of the teeth, concentrating on the gum margin.

Once calculus is present, it usually needs to be removed by ultrasonic scaling. The instruments used are the same as used for humans, and also clean below the gum margin where plaque also accumulates. Loose or infected teeth need to be extracted. Then the teeth are polished to smooth the surface of the teeth to discourage plaque formation. This procedure needs to be performed under a general anaesthetic.

The best way to avoid dental problems is to take your pet to its veterinarian to get a dental checkup once a year (when its vaccinations are due is a good idea), since periodontal disease can be a painful problem, and can significantly affect your pet's general health.