

# Home Dental Care: What Works!

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Oral disease is one of the most prevalent diseases in dogs and cats. 80% of adult dogs and 70% of adult cats have some form of oral disease. Dental problems are among the top three pet owners concerns in dogs and cats. Calculus and gingivitis are the most common conditions diagnosed by veterinarians in all ages of animals.

Why is the incidence of dental disease so high? Is it due to lack of compliance or the lack of educating the client about the importance of dentistry? Pet's living longer lives, is one reason that oral disease is more prevalent. We are already improving so many aspects of their lives, but dental care seems to still be lagging behind.

Companion animals have become an important part of our lives. Many people consider the pet a part of their family. This bond has been important to the veterinarian and his staff because clients are more readily interested in seeking care for their pets. It is essential that communication remains open between all parties. All members of the veterinary team must be excited and motivated and thus project that enthusiasm to the client. The veterinarian and his staff must educate the client about the need for dentistry and convince them of its importance. Statistics show that 25 percent of your clients will accept whatever you say immediately; another 60 percent will take a little time to accept your recommendations; the remaining 15 percent will not accept your suggestions.

It is necessary to communicate the importance of dental treatment and oral care in many ways. It should become as routine as vaccinations and heartworm testing in your clinics.

## **Educate**

As veterinary health professionals, it is our job not only to promote dentistry but to educate our clients about the importance of good oral health. How can we do this? Advertise, dental report cards, giving out toothbrushes and sample packets are a few ways to promote the services you offer. The technician is responsible for client education. Start this education process with your clients at the first puppy or kitten visit. Talk with them about the importance of good oral care by expressing the fact that the mouth is a mirror to the body. Give handouts explaining the relationship between oral disease and systemic health. Pictures are worth a thousand words. Use pictures to give the client an impression of what can happen if oral home care is not given to their pet!

The use of a dental report card is a great way to help the client understand the treatment that was given to their animal. Include a simplified dental chart on which problem areas can be marked or highlighted. A section for diagnosis, treatment, home care, prescriptions and follow-up visits should be included on this report card. Keep it simple and use bright, cheerful colors with clipart and before and after pictures on the take home sheet.

Education can be improved by letting the client be involved in the treatment plan. After the oral exam, review dental charts and radiographs with them. This simple task can reinforce the importance of the problem to the client. This can be difficult in dentistry, as treatment is often done while the animal is under anesthesia for the oral exam. However the review of the charts and radiographs even after the treatment will be appreciated by the client. It can give them a sense of being involved. Be sure to explain the problem in terms that appropriate in order to ensure your client understands.

## **Client communication**

The proper use of dental charts and record keeping is a critical part of proper dental care. There are multiple types of charts available. A modified version of the dental chart can be used as a take home care sheet for the client that will help them understand the problem areas and home care instructions that were recommended for their pet. This form should also give a contact number for questions or concerns and the date of the follow-up visit. A reminder letter can be a courteous reminder to client of the need for follow up visits. This can be sent after treatment related to periodontal disease or post surgical that explains the need for a follow-up visit. The need to evaluate healing and to evaluate home care effectiveness to ensure the continued prevention of disease progression and possibility of systemic disease should be addressed. Ask the client to call the office to schedule a follow up exam. Many clinics include the cost of the follow up visit in the initial service fees unless additional sedation or anesthesia is required.

## **Evaluate**

Before you prescribe home care for a patient, it is important to assess the client and the animal. Is the owner ready, willing and able to perform proper home care? Are they committed, interested and physically able to provide care? Does the pet have the temperament to allow for home care? All of these aspects must be considered before prescribing any home care regime. It will not work to prescribe routine brushing if you know the client will not follow through. If this is the case, you may be better off recommending an oral care diet as opposed to brushing.

Another consideration that needs to be taken into consideration when recommending home care is the degree of treatment necessary. For young pets, the prevention of plaque accumulation can be achieved by plaque removal at least two times per week. For moderate accumulations and disease, following a professional dental prophylaxis plaque removal every other day can help improve oral health. When the degree of disease is severe, professional periodontal prophylaxis is necessary followed by twice a day chlorhexidine rinses for one week and then once a week chlorhexidine rinses and daily brushing.

### **Demonstrate**

Demonstrate oral cleansing techniques to the client. Telling a client to brush their pet's teeth without a demonstration is of no benefit. When demonstrating, use a soft bristled brush or gauze. Use a 45 degree angle to the tooth and circular motion. It is important to start the demonstration on a dental model. This allows the client to see the actual brushing technique without the lips getting in the way. The model also shows them what all of the teeth look like and where problem areas might be lurking. Following the model, demonstrate on the owner's pet or a clinic pet. Demonstrate on one side and observe the client brushing the other side. By doing this, you are able to evaluate their techniques and offer suggestions and tips. If you use the owner's pet, you are also able to access the pet's temperament and acceptance of the tooth brushing.

A disclosing solution can be used to help demonstrate plaque on the teeth. This product comes in individual tubes with an applicator swab that allows the plaque on tooth to be disclosed without staining the fur.

Not every client or patient is a candidate for tooth brushing. There are alternative methods of plaque control and removal. Work with your clients to determine which would be the best option for them and their pet.

### **Advise and recommend**

It is necessary to warn the client that an animal's failure to improve with tooth brushing may be due to an underlying disease such as; diabetes, kidney disease, FIV or leukemia. As veterinary professionals it is our duty to also warn the client about label claims. Not all products that say "veterinarian recommended" are good for their pets. Always recommend products with solid research to back those claims. Ask for the research results to prove the product will be efficacious.

In 1997 a group of Veterinary Dental Health specialists formed a group called the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC). This council rewards products that claim to provide some type of oral benefit a seal of approval. This seal of approval was based on the American Dental Seal of Approval currently use for human products. At this time, 33 products have been awarded this seal.

These are the products that currently have the VOHC seal of approval.

- Prescription Diet® Canine t/d – Original and Small Bites
- Prescription Diet® Feline t/d
- Friskies® Feline Dental Diet
- New and Improved Prescription Diet® Feline t/d
- Del Monte Tartar Check® Dog Biscuit: Small and Large Size
- Friskies® Cheweez® Beefhide Treats
- Science Diet® Oral Care Diet for Dogs
- Science Diet® Oral Care Diet for Cats
- Iams® Chunk Dental Defense Diet for Dogs
- Eukanuba® Adult Maintenance Diet for Dogs
- Greenies® Edible Dog Treats: Teenie, Petite, Regular, Large & Jumbo
- Greenies® Hip and Joint Care Chews
- Greenies® Feline Dental Treats
- Hartz Flavor Infused Oral Chews: Large and Small
- Nestle Purina PetCare PVD (Dental Health) Feline
- Nestle Purina PetCare PVD (Dental Health) Canine – Small Bites & Regular
- Healthymouth Antiplaque Water Additive
- Tartar Shield Soft Rawhide Chews
- Vetradent Dog Chews
- Blue Chews, dc Dental Chews, Baby Bluechews, dc TinyToy Dental Chews
- Bright Bites and Checkup Chews for Dogs
- Sanos Dental Sealant
- Virbac Veggie Dent Chew for Dogs
- Royal Canin Feline Dental Diet
- Milk-Bone Brushing Chews for Dogs

The companies that have applied for this seal have tested their products using very strict protocols developed by the VOHC. Products that have this seal have good science behind them and have proven that they work. Additional information can be found at [www.vohc.org](http://www.vohc.org). Look for it!!!!

Prescription Diet® Canine and Feline t/d – Original size was the first diet specifically designed to prevent plaque and calculus accumulations, improve oral malodor and gingival health. These diets use a cellulose matrix that allows the tooth to penetrate without shattering the kibble. This action acts as a “squeegee” to remove the plaque from the teeth. The t/d diets are formulated as a complete maintenance diet.

Science Diet® Oral Care is another complete maintenance diet with dental benefit.

Friskies® Dental Diet is a complete maintenance diet with dental benefit. This is a specially formulated diet which uses a larger kibble size to increase chewing time. This diet reduces plaque and calculus.

Both Iams® and the Eukanuba® Dental Defense are complete maintenance diets with dental benefit claims. These diets are considered dual action by being a crunchy kibble with microcleansing crystals. These crystals are hexametaphosphate crystals. Hexametaphosphate is a calcium chelator that prevents the plaque from mineralizing into calculus.

Del Monte Tartar Check® Dog Biscuits are another product that utilized hexametaphosphate to prevent the plaque from mineralizing into calculus.

Friskies® Cheweez® Beefhide Treats are rawhide treats that reduced calculus accumulation by 44% after three months. The dog’s chewing action on the rawhide is the mechanism that reduces that plaque.

Greenies® are another highly palatable treat that reduce plaque. Greenies come in five sizes. It is imperative that the correct size treat is fed to the pet to prevent blockage problems.

Hartz Flavor Infused Oral Chews are rawhide treats that reduced calculus accumulation. The dog’s chewing action on the rawhide is the mechanism that reduces that plaque by as much as 46% and calculus by as much as 68% within 3 weeks.

Nestle Purina PetCare PVD (Dental Health) for Canine and Feline.

The most recent product to receive the VOHC seal of approval is Sanos, a sealant that reportedly helps prevent gingivitis for up to six months

There are many other chews and treats available. CET Chews have a Dual-Enzyme System to remove plaque. The chews help to keep breath fresh and teeth clean.

Dentabone has a unique shape and texture that is palatable and cleans the teeth through abrasion.

As with all treats, inform the client that treats can be high in calories therefore if they feed them regularly the regular dietary intake must be reduced.

There are many chemical agents on the market that claim to have dental benefit. These agents range from pastes, sprays and gels to water additives. Human toothpastes should never be used for pets as it contains phosphates and detergents that can affect the GI tract. Animals must swallow the paste thus animal pastes are specifically designed without those harmful ingredients. Animal pastes also don’t contain abrasives that are normally found in human pastes. The main benefit of using animal toothpaste is the great flavors that help encourage the animal to enjoy tooth brushing. Toothpaste also helps the client relate to brushing their pet’s teeth. Humans use paste for brushing, so using a paste on their pet’s teeth seems like a logical thing to do.

OraZn™ by Maxiguard® is more stable than previous Maxiguard® product. This gel has a neutral pH formulation of zinc gluconate, stabilized with taurine, in a tasteless gel. This gel does not contain chlorhexidine. OraZn™ is widely accepted by both cats and dogs especially after oral surgeries as a method of keeping the wound clean and aids in healing.

There are many chlorhexidine gluconate rinses on the market. These gels are helpful in the prophylaxis procedure and can be dispensed to the client for treatment of varying degrees of periodontal disease.

The barrier method of plaque control is currently limited to OraVet, a plaque prevention gel that electrostatically binds to the tooth forming a barrier to which plaque can not attach to the tooth.

This review will in no way include all products.

Remember it is our responsibility to evaluate, educate, demonstrate, recommend and advise our clients in regards to oral home care.

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