

Teeth a key part of good health for cats

February is National Pet Dental Health Month, so I want to convey the importance of dental health and



ELAINE WEXLER-MITCHELL
FOR THE REGISTER

how it can improve the quality of life of our pets. I am going to tell you the story of Rusty.

Rusty needed a new home. He was an 8-year-old cat whose

couldn't keep any longer, and who fortunately was adopted by some of my long-term clients. He was a very sweet boy. Before his adoption, my clients asked for Rusty's owners to have him examined and for basic lab work to be run. We found that Rusty had some very early kidney disease and some significant dental disease. My clients were hoping that Rusty would be completely healthy cat, but they still were willing to provide Rusty with a new, loving home. They wanted to do what they could for

Rusty's health, and they agreed to provide him with the dental work that he needed.

It is recommended that human adults have semi-annual dental checkups and dental cleanings. We check our feline patient's teeth at each regular exam visit and then make recommendations when dental care is needed.

There is no set frequency as to how often cats need their teeth cleaned, but 85 percent of pets over the age of 4 years have some level of dental disease.

Clients ask about non-aesthetic dentistry, and with cats, this involves hand scaling and brief polishing and is only appropriate when there is very mild dental disease. Most of the time when we perform hand scaling, we find erosions and periodontal disease that require a more extensive procedure.

A basic dental "prophy" involves anesthesia and allows safe and thorough cleaning and polishing of the teeth. This is adequate for many young cats with mild tartar, plaque, and gin-

givitis. To properly clean teeth, sub-gingival curettage is needed, and this procedure can damage the gums if attempted in an awake cat. It is also very important to correctly polish teeth after scaling. Without anesthesia this is very difficult to do, and rough, unpolished tooth surfaces build plaque again more rapidly.

A full dental procedure involves anesthesia, dental X-rays, probing of the teeth, hand scaling, ultrasonic scaling, polishing and sealing of the teeth. Problem teeth are identified and graded. Diseased teeth are extracted in cats, since feline teeth are very small and most cannot be restored adequately to save them.

Trying to preserve diseased teeth often prolongs discomfort, since deterioration will continue. We want to keep teeth healthy, but if cats lose teeth (even all of

their teeth), they eat and do well. Fortunately, our pet cats don't have the same cosmetic needs we have for teeth. They don't need their teeth to hunt and kill for food. We provide them with a nice bowl of food daily!

Most clients tell me that their cat is like a new pet once we take care of dental disease. Cats rarely let you know that

their mouths are bothering them. Most often owners only recognize their cat's discomfort in hindsight.

Although Rusty had early kidney disease, we felt that he was a great candidate for dentistry. He handled his anesthesia well and was monitored closely during and after his dental procedure. Intravenous fluids assisted in his rapid recovery.

Adult cats have 30 teeth, and Rusty required 11 extractions during his dental

procedure. We treated Rusty with pain relievers and antibiotics following his dental procedure. It is likely that if he had had dental work earlier in his life, when less disease was present, he wouldn't have needed so many extractions. Rusty was lucky to have new owners that were able to take care of him and provide for his dental needs. His mouth healed perfectly and he is eating well and active.

Dentistry can be expensive and it becomes more expensive when more disease is present and more extractions are needed. Preventive care is always recommended when possible and professional prophylaxis will help keep teeth healthy. Don't avoid dentistry for your pet when it is recommended. The risk of anesthesia, when administered and monitored properly, is far less than the risk of disease progression and associated dental pain.

Age is not a reason to avoid dentistry. We have performed successful dentistry in cats over 20 years old. Shouldn't senior cats be as comfortable as possi-

ble, and shouldn't we get rid of the bad teeth and infections in their mouths?

Various home dental-care products that are available, and you can discuss options with your veterinarian. Home dental care decreases the need for professional cleanings in most pets.

In my experience, the veterinary diets designed to prevent tartar buildup and gingivitis work extremely well. They are most effective if initiated before any dental disease is present or after proper professional dental cleaning. I recommend these diets for almost all cats.

Happy cats have healthy mouths, so be sure your help keep your kitty's teeth and gums in great shape. Rusty has a new chapter in his life that is now free of dental disease and discomfort. He is getting along extremely well in his new home.

Dr. Wexler-Mitchell is board certified in feline practice and owns The Cat Care Clinic in Orange. 714-282-2287 or catcare.com.