

February is dental health month

Take time to learn how to care for your pet's teeth

BY VERA LAWLOR

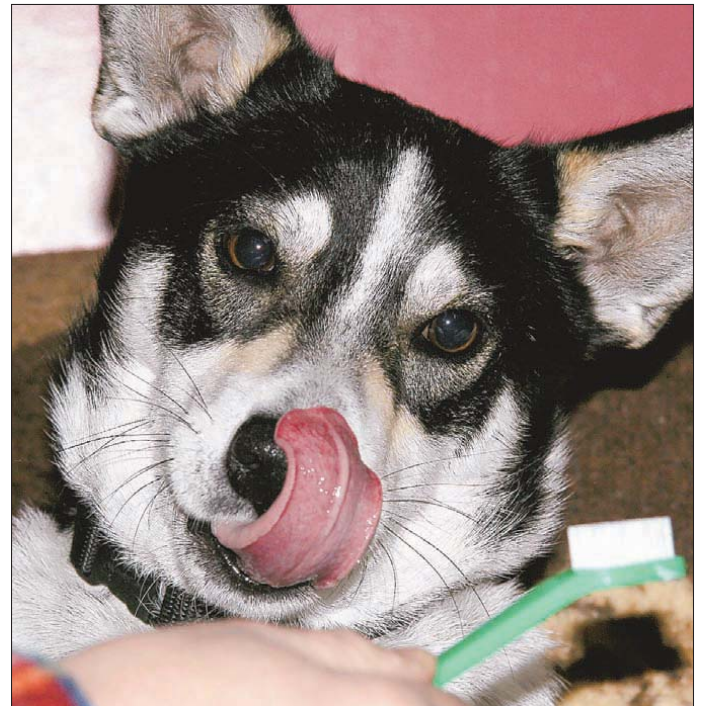
I usually love to get “kisses” from my collie mix, Jason, but lately his breath has smelled so bad that I haven’t encouraged this interaction. I’ve also noticed that his teeth have quite a bit of tartar buildup, so last weekend I bought poultry-flavored doggie toothpaste and toothbrushes for Jason and our Rotweiler-shepherd mix, Lucy. As I squeezed the toothpaste onto Lucy’s brush, Jason watched with great interest. And, when I opened her mouth and began to sweep the brush gently across her teeth and gums, Jason was sitting right beside me fascinated by the process. Of course, when his turn came he wasn’t as brave and I had to gently persuade him to open his mouth. He did settle down once he realized that the toothpaste was actually tasty.

According to the American Veterinary Dental Society (AVDS), 80 percent of dogs and 70 percent of cats show signs of oral disease by age 3, often indicated by bad breath, a

change in eating or chewing habits, pawing at the face and mouth and depression. To address the significance of oral health care for pets, several veterinary groups are sponsoring National Pet Dental Health Month in February. Sponsors include AVDS, American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), Academy of Veterinary Dentistry, American Veterinary Dental College, Academy of Veterinary Dental Technicians, Veterinary Oral Health Council and Hill’s Pet Nutrition Inc.

“Oral disease is the most frequently diagnosed health problem for pets,” says Dr. James Cook, past president of the AVMA. “Twice-a-year checkups, including an oral health checkup, are important to ensure your pet is not in pain and is not suffering from serious oral health problems. Besides causing receding gums and tooth loss, bacteria in the mouth can enter the bloodstream, potentially infecting the heart, liver and kidneys.”

Although daily tooth brushing is advised for dogs and cats, only 2 percent of dog owners follow through,



according to the AVDS. In addition, veterinary dental experts say that 65 percent of dogs with stage one periodontal disease often go untreated. Bad breath and yellowing teeth are two of the earliest signs of dental health problems in pets. If left untreated, these symptoms can develop into periodontal disease or gingivitis.

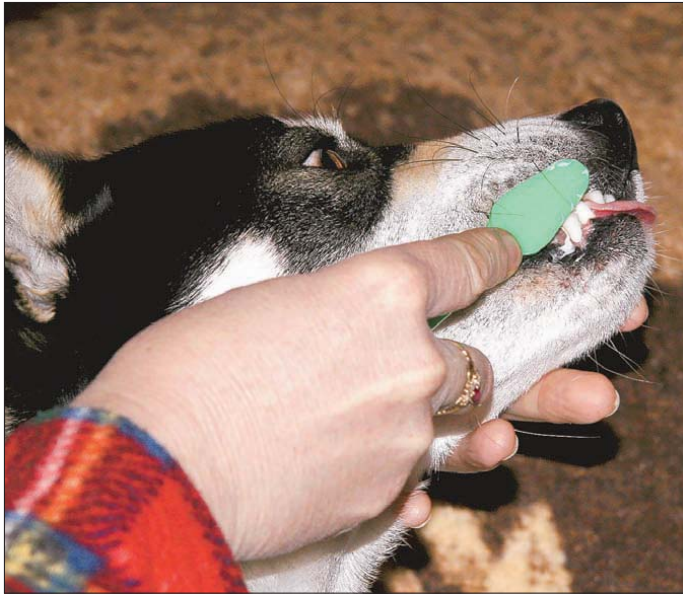
“Just as the public has come to realize that their own oral health is linked to their overall health, veterinarians want people to understand that dental health care is essential to maintaining the overall health and well-being of the family pet,” says Cook.

Some of the signs that your pet may be experiencing mouth or tooth pain may include blood-tinged drooling, difficulty eating/reluctance to eat, swelling/redness of gums, tipping/tilting the head when eating, refusing to eat hard foods and a change in mouth odor. If pet owners notice any of these symptoms, dental experts say they should immediately make an appointment with a veterinarian so that their pet

doesn’t suffer unnecessarily.

Prevention of dental health problems is as simple as following a dental care regimen at home and following up with regular checkups with your veterinarian, say experts at the New Jersey Veterinary Medical Association (NJVMA). Getting your dog or cat used to having its teeth cleaned at home should ideally be started when they are young, but pets of all ages can learn to adapt to this routine. Our dog Lucy is 10 and she is adjusting well to having her teeth cleaned.

NJVMA experts caution pet owners to use toothbrushes and toothpastes made especially for pets and to be gentle when brushing, taking care to get the insides and outsides of all teeth. In order to train your dog or cat to tolerate regular tooth brushing, start by massaging the animal’s gums with an appropriate pet tooth paste. Poultry-flavored toothpaste is very popular and most animals love paste. This process should be repeated approximately 2-3 times a week. Special foods, along with dental chews,



PHOTOS BY TOM GOSSELIN

Vera's dog, Jason, is OK with the brushing regimen.

Steps for success

STEP 1: Take your pet to the veterinarian for a dental exam. Don't wait for his annual checkup if you suspect a problem.

STEP 2: Begin a dental care regimen at home. Your veterinarian can suggest steps that may include brushing your pet's teeth. One of the most convenient and effective ways to combat oral disease is feeding specially formulated foods proven effective in combating plaque and tartar buildup. The Seal of Acceptance from the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC), an organization initiated by the American Veterinary Dental Society to guide consumers, appears on products that meet defined standards for plaque and tartar control in dogs and cats. For more information on the VOHC or its product standards, visit www.vohc.org.

STEP 3: Schedule regular veterinary checkups. These are essential in helping your veterinarian monitor the progress of your pet's dental health routine. Your veterinary health-care team can help you schedule the appropriate visits.

Source: Leading veterinary sponsors of National Pet Dental Health Month. For more information on dental healthcare for pets, visit www.petdental.com.

rawhide, dental bones and other healthy products that pets consider treats can help keep teeth white and free of disease.

Vera Lawlor is The Parent Paper's pet columnist. You can contact Vera at parentpaper@northjersey.com.

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