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Dental Cleaning in Cats

What is involved with a professional teeth cleaning visit for my cat?

It all starts with an exam room evaluation. When rough tartar accumulates on tooth surfaces and touches the gum line, it's time for a professional oral assessment, treatment, and prevention visit. This visit will include a thorough dental examination, teeth cleaning, and polishing to remove the tartar and invisible plaque from all of the tooth surfaces.

Your veterinarian may perform pre-anesthetic blood tests to ensure that kidney and liver function are satisfactory for anesthesia, as well as an evaluation of the heart and abdomen if needed.

What happens during the exam?

For proper dental care your cat must be placed under general anesthesia. Once your cat is closely monitored under general anesthesia, your veterinarian and veterinary assistants will thoroughly examine the mouth, noting abnormalities in the medical record.

Dental x-rays will be examined and a dental probe will be used to evaluate gum bleeding and periodontal pockets, where food can accumulate if not cared for. When periodontal disease is advanced, it may not be possible to save badly affected teeth, which may need to be extracted.



"For proper dental care your cat must be placed under general anesthesia."

How are my cat's teeth cleaned?

Next, tooth scaling will be performed, using both hand and ultrasonic scalers, to remove tartar above and below the gum line. The tartar below the gum line causes the most significant periodontal disease, so it is important that it be thoroughly removed.

After scaling, the teeth are polished to remove microscopic scratches and decrease the rate of subsequent plaque build-up. Special applications such as fluoride, antibiotic preparations and cleaning compounds may be used to decrease tooth sensitivity, strengthen enamel, treat bacterial infection and reduce future plaque accumulation.



The procedures your cat may require will be discussed with you before her dental cleaning. Since it can be difficult to predict the extent of dental disease in advance of the procedure, it is imperative that your veterinarian be able to reach you during the procedure to discuss any additional treatment that may be necessary.

Why can't I just remove the tartar and plaque with a human dental scaler?

Although you can remove the accumulated tartar above the gum line, in cats that are extremely cooperative, there are three problems with doing this. First, only the visible tartar above the gum line is removed, leaving plaque and tartar below the gum line which will continue to cause periodontal problems. Second, it's neither possible nor safe to clean the inner surfaces of the teeth properly in a conscious cat. Third, the use of any instrument on the tooth enamel will cause microscopic scratches on the surface and will ultimately damage the tooth surface, leading to further disease – this is the reason your dental hygienist always polishes your teeth after removing tartar with dental instruments.



Do I have to make an appointment for my cat to have a dental scaling and polishing?

Yes. Your veterinarian will perform pre-anesthetic tests and examine your pet for underlying disorders prior to the procedure, and they may determine that antibiotic treatment should be prescribed in advance.

How can I prevent tartar accumulation after the procedure?

Plaque and tartar begin forming in as little as six hours after your cat's dental cleaning. A home dental care program including regular tooth brushing is a must. Your veterinarian will provide you with detailed instructions on how to brush or rinse your cat's teeth. Plaque and tartar accumulation can be decreased by rubbing a Q-tip along the gum line daily.



Can I use human toothpaste?

Absolutely not. Human dentifrice or toothpaste should never be used in cats. Human teeth cleaning detergents contain ingredients that are not intended to be swallowed and can cause internal problems if they are swallowed. Human products also commonly contain higher levels of salt which can be a problem for some cats.



You should also avoid using baking soda to clean your cat's teeth. Baking soda has a high alkaline content and, if swallowed, it can upset the acid balance in the stomach and digestive tract. In addition, baking soda does not taste good, which may cause your cat to be uncooperative when you try to brush her teeth.

Why is pet toothpaste recommended?

Numerous pet toothpastes are non-foaming, safe to be swallowed and available in flavors that are appealing to cats including poultry, beef, malt and mint. If you use a product that tastes good, your cat will be more likely to enjoy the whole experience.

In addition to the pleasant taste, many of these pet-friendly toothpastes contain enzymes that are designed to help break down plaque chemically, which reduces the time you need to actually spend brushing your cat's teeth.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Jan Bellows, DVM, Dipl. AVDC, ABVP

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