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Dental Care II **Teri Fleming and Vickie Byard.** **Beardie Bulletin, Fall 1999, 29/3, p8**

Dental care for our dogs has become almost as sophisticated as our own. Some would wonder why it has taken so long for the veterinary community and owners alike to realize that dogs experience the same dental pain that we dread. Veterinary Dental is one of the fastest growing areas of specialization and has made a number of treatments more widely available. One such area is the treatment of tooth fractures. When a tooth fractures it can result in exposing the pulp, nerve and parts of the root depending on the fracture site. Anyone who has had a cavity exposed to air or cold irrigation can imagine that this can be a painful condition, though many dogs don't show obvious complaint. Treatment is aimed at decreasing discomfort and preventing infection and varies depending on how deep the fracture is and how soon it is discovered. Therapy can range from a simple smoothing of sharp edges to extraction and includes filling defects, root canal, and crowning.

Orthodontics is now also possible in canine dentistry. Badly misaligned teeth cannot only cause abnormal wear and thereby endanger other teeth, but when severe can cause damage to the soft tissue in the mouth and increase the chance of infections. In severe cases where lower canine teeth are involved, this may even lead to puncture of the upper palate creating an opening into the nasal passage. Unlike humans, the course of treatment in dogs only lasts a few months and can prevent pain and the above mentioned complications. The extent of the potential damage must be carefully weighed, as any orthodontic therapy would DISQUALIFY a dog from show competition. While these problems are thankfully fairly rare, gum disease is not. Several sources estimate that 90-90% of middle aged dogs have some degree of periodontal disease. In the past, this inevitably led to tooth loss and risk of infections that can spread to the blood and surrounding structures. Today, therapy includes not only routine cleaning and scaling, but gum surgery and the application or injection of substances to the tooth that can slow the progress and even bring some reversal of the damage.

As with any disease process, prevention is easier and more effective than treatment. Much has been written in this regard that compares type of food and chew toys that can have an impact on the health of the teeth and gums. Following is the advice of one veterinary dental practice.



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Teri Fleming, BCCA Health Chair

Brush Only the Teeth You Intend to Keep By Vickie Byard, CVT, VDT

"Brush my dog's teeth? I've never heard of brushing a dog's teeth. Is this really necessary?" As a Qualified Dental Technician, I can't tell you how often I'm asked these questions. So - is it really necessary? ABSOLUTELY! The anatomy of a dog's mouth is not that much different than that of humans. In other words, there are teeth, gums, salivary glands, a tongue, and plenty of bacteria. But, the biggest difference is that dogs cannot tend to their own oral health. Experts estimate that 80 percent of domestic dogs older than 3 years suffer from periodontal disease.

Periodontal disease is a term that includes plaque and tartar buildup, gingivitis, gingival pocketing, jawbone damage, and ultimately, tooth loss. Dr. Milinda Lommer (University of California, Davis) says, "The primary reason domestic dogs develop periodontal disease is lack of care of the teeth at home." Different breeds also present their own individual problems. Dogs with long hair on their muzzle, short-nosed breeds and toy breeds are especially prone to dental disease.

Myths Dispelled

1. It is not normal for dogs to have "Doggie Breath". Bad breath is a warning sign that there is something wrong. Although, there can be numerous sources of halitosis, many time, the cause is an infection somewhere within the mouth.
2. Annual professional dental cleaning does not alleviate the need for home care.
3. Old dogs can be taught new tricks! It is easiest to teach puppies to tolerate tooth brushing, but if you have an adult dog, it is certainly possible to start this training.
4. Periodontal disease is painful! Animals have an uncanny ability to deal with their discomfort. That doesn't mean they do not experience it. Owners report to me that their dog acts more like a puppy after dentistry. They play with their toys again; they chew hard food and biscuits again. To me this



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indicates that the dog had not been feeling well before the dentistry but the signs were so gradual that they went unnoticed.

5. Veterinarians are not performing dentistry for aesthetic purposes. The consequences of dental disease extend beyond a pretty smile and sweet breath. The bacterium that causes periodontal disease enters the dog's bloodstream and can effect the vital organs such as the heart, kidneys, lungs and liver.

Dr. Rosenblad, a veterinary dentist at Angell Memorial Veterinary Hospital, says: "Dogs eat, communicate, play and groom with their mouths, so if we are concerned about their quality of life, we should be concerned about their oral health."