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AVMA News
FREQUENT TOOTH BRUSHING RECOMMENDED TO FIGHT GUM DISEASE IN DOGS AND CATS

Frequent tooth brushing of dogs and cats will prevent periodontal disease, an inflammation of the gums that affects 80 percent of pets over five years old, Leigh West-Hyde, D.V.M., Davis, CA, told an audience at the 131st annual convention of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).

According to Dr. West-Hyde, dental problems often appear in one- to two-year-olds among the smaller dog breeds. If left untreated, periodontal disease can destroy bone and cause tooth loss.

A dental checkup is usually part of a pet's annual exam. Since dogs and cats are not very cooperative patients when it comes to cleaning, a general anesthesia is given. The veterinarian can then clean the teeth.

Pet dental care should include regular brushing and a proper diet. Dr. West-Hyde offers these tips:

* Use a sensitive tooth or ultra-soft human toothbrush or brush specially designed for pets, available at pet stores.

* Don't use human toothpaste; it could upset the animal's stomach. Toothpaste formulated for cats and dogs is available through a veterinarian or pet store.

* Avoid over-restraint of your pet and keep brushing sessions short and positive. A cat or small dog can be held in the lap. Praise and reassure your pet throughout the process.

* Brush using a circular motion where the tooth and the gum meet. Cat teeth may be harder to brush, so a piece of soft gauze wrapped around the finger or a cotton swab can be used to massage the tooth-gum interface.

"Dry pet food is better for a pet's teeth than canned, because moist food tends to stick to the teeth. If this happens, make sure any residue is brushed away. Hard dog biscuits have limited teeth cleaning action whereas rawhide chews or resilient chew toys offer excellent cleaning action.

"Periodontal disease, traumatic tooth fractures and malocclusions are the most common dental problems in dogs and cats," Dr. West-Hyde said. In addition, cats commonly develop resorption of the teeth at the gumline (the teeth dissolve) secondary to periodontal disease. Unlike humans, cavities produced by bacteria are rare in animals.

Veterinarians sometimes recommend orthodontic braces for dogs when their teeth are misaligned and strike soft tissue. Hereditary problems are a common cause of these misalignments. The purpose of the braces is to relieve discomfort for the dog, rather than to provide cosmetic improvement of appearance.

In a related presentation, Karl Field, D.V.M., Nutley, NJ, reported that squirrel monkeys, when fed a soft diet high in simple sugars as a reward for their performance, were susceptible to periodontal disease.

The monkeys under Dr. Field's care were developing advanced periodontal disease which, if untreated, would progress to bone destruction and loss of teeth. Severely decayed teeth were removed, and the periodontal disease brought under control. An annual dental cleaning program was instituted and the animals were switched to a diet of natural foods and hard primate biscuits. The new diet is lower in simple sugars and the biscuits do not stick to the monkey's teeth as readily as the previous diet. The biscuits also are abrasive and clean the monkey's teeth as they eat. Since beginning this program a year ago, the monkeys have required only descaling, polishing and an occasional tooth extraction, reported Dr. Field.

Iowa State Veterinarian
WOLF HYBRIDS: THE FANTASY PET OF THE NINETIES

Pet owners enchanted by recent movies and television shows that have popularized wolf hybrids as pets need to “see through the fantasy and into the reality of owning a potentially dangerous pet,” Elisabeth Duman told an audience at the 131st annual convention of the AVMA.

Wolf hybrids are part wolf and part dog. In the past years, most wolf/dogs were bred to be more dog than wolf. “The tendency more recently has been toward ‘high-content’ hybrids, and any animal that is very much wolf is going to exhibit dominant wolf behavioral traits,” reported Ms. Duman, the Regional Coordinator for the North American Wildlife Park Foundation.

According to Ms. Duman, there are distinct differences between a wolf and a dog. “Wolves are slim animals with a full coat of hair making them look heavier. The chest is very narrow; the front legs are close together with feet pointing out and long splayed toes. Wolves have a large head with eyes slanted and gold to yellow in color. The tail is a ‘brush’ with fur round in cross-section; it is never curled or flopped over the back.”

“Often people think that malamutes and Siberian huskies look just like wolves, but they are built to pull, with broader chests and shorter legs,” she said. “Wolves don’t have the cute facial mask of a huskie or malamute, either.”

According to Ms. Duman, some potential problems with these high-content hybrid wolves include:

*Hyperactivity - If the hybrid exhibits more wolf traits, it will be hyperactive and very inquisitive. The animal may be shy or hard to physically restrain.

*Dominance Behavior - At sexual maturity, the animal may challenge humans for dominance, perhaps attacking someone the animal judges vulnerable.

*Territoriality - Wolves do not tolerate contact with animals outside their pack. Hybrid owners are often surprised when at sexual maturity their “pets” decide to systematically attack and kill their neighbor’s dogs.

“Predatory Behavior Toward Children - In 1993, eleven children were killed by wolf-type “pets.” The animals had shown no sign of hostility before, killing the children quickly and efficiently without warning.

Fortunately, many hybrid owners who fear their pet is more wolf have been misled and have hybrids that are more dog. If an animal does exhibit wolf traits, though, it should not be kept as a family pet.

Proper housing is a priority for the high-content hybrids. Ms. Duman recommends an enclosure of at least 1,600 square feet. The fence needs to be strong and at least eight feet high with an overhang into the pen. A fence skirt placed on the ground and connected to the fence prevents digging under the pen. Another fence, installed a few feet outside the pen, prevents children from reaching in to pet the animals. It may be overkill, but three children lost their arms last year to “friendly” hybrids.

Several states have enacted laws restricting the keeping of wolf hybrids as pets. The AVMA discourages the keeping of wild animals as pets, because of problems associated with disease, diet exercise, housing and traumatic injury.

BENEFITS OF CAT OWNERSHIP OUTWEIGH RISK OF CAT SCRATCH DISEASE

About 41 percent of domestic cats are infected with a bacterial agent that can cause “cat scratch disease” in human beings. But the benefits of cat ownership outweigh the risk of disease.

Cat Scratch Disease, which affects about 22,000 people annually, rarely results in serious illness. It usually causes low grade fever, general malaise and swollen lymph nodes near the site of the scratch. The problem is its symptoms can mimic many other diseases, including cancer, and that can result in a lot of time and expensive testing before it’s diagnosed.
"Cat Scratch Disease may linger for a while, but it eventually goes away on its own," said Jane E. Koehler, M.D., Assistant Professor of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco. "With all the benefits people get from the companionship of owning a cat, it would be foolish for people to get rid of their cats."

Dr. Koehler found the bacterial agent *Rochalimaea henselae* — recently identified as the cause of cat scratch disease — in the blood samples of about 41 percent of domestic cats studied in San Francisco.

In addition, she isolated the same bacteria from skin lesions of people with weakened immune systems — such as HIV-positive patients and those undergoing chemotherapy treatments — suffering from a more serious condition. Called *bacillary aniomatosis*, the disease causes red lesions that mimic Kaposi Sarcoma, a form of cancer common in AIDS patients, and can be fatal if left untreated.

**Bacillary aniomatosis** is an infectious disease and completely treatable with antibiotics, so it’s important for HIV patients to tell their physicians that they own a cat,” Dr. Koehler explained.

“We’ve known about cat scratch disease since the early part of the century. Now we know its origin and where it comes from — cat’s blood,” Dr. Koehler added. “So we can start working on preventing it."

Dr. Koehler recommends several steps to avoid contracting the diseases, including taking care to avoid scratches when playing with a cat and thoroughly washing scratches or bites with soap and water. Controlling fleas on the pet is also advised.

People with weakened immune systems may choose to take extra precautions, such as purchasing a mature cat, since kittens are more likely to be infected and more likely to scratch, and purchasing soft nail caps that fit over the cat’s claws.

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**VETERINARIANS BREAKING NEW GROUND: SAVING PET LIVES THROUGH BEHAVIOR MEDICINE**

Veterinarians are breaking new ground to save pet lives by treating and preventing behavior problems blamed for euthanasia of 15 - 20 million animals each year.

Some of the most common complaints of dog owners, including house soiling, aggression, destructive behaviors, and lack of responses to training, may be signs that a pet suffers from hyperactivity, reported Walter Burghardt, Jr., D.V.M., Coral Springs, FL, Director of the Behavior Clinic for Animals.

"This is a new area of study in dogs, but in most instances, hyperactivity is a manageable, treatable problem," Dr. Burghardt said. “It often leads people to get rid of their dogs. But when treated, these animals are perfectly delightful pets."

Dr. Burghardt believes that hyperactivity is common in dogs, but it is hard to diagnose. While there are a variety of tests used to diagnose the condition in people, there are no comparable tests for dogs.

Hyperactivity in dogs is treated in much the same way as in people. Human medications, such as stimulants and others that control the nervous system, may be prescribed along with behavior modification training that stresses rewards.

“Rewards-based training provides an easy, reliable way to gain control over behavior. And when it comes to pets or people with poor attention spans, a clear relationship between behavior and reward can relieve a lot of their frustration,” Dr. Burghardt explained.

Dog owners should consult their veterinarian if they are troubled by signs of hyperactivity in their pets, including delays in learning proper manners training, lack of response to simple control steps, irregular eating patterns, trouble maintaining weight, destructive behaviors and house soiling.

A study of aggressive behavior in cats reported by Sharon L. Crowell-Davis, D.V.M.,
Ph. D., Associate Professor at the University of Georgia, Athens, offered cat owners several tips to prevent or reduce expressions of pet aggression.

"Aggression is the second most common complaint of pet owners," Dr. Crowell-Davis said. Aggression may be directed at owners, other people or other cats. It may have various causes, resulting from fear, inappropriate play behaviors, or a disruption of social relationships.

"Many cat owners have two or three cats and some even more. It is a mistake to try to put too many cats in too little space," she added. "People should only keep a small number of cats and bring a new cat into the household carefully with constant supervision, rewarding all of the cats for good behaviors."

In addition, pet owners should avoid approaching a cat when it is anxious and take care not to overstimulate the animal during play. Like other pet behavior problems, persistent aggression can be successfully treated through drug therapy and behavior modification.

**VETERINARIANS WHO EXPAND SERVICES CAN HELP ANIMAL PRODUCERS SAVE MONEY**

Veterinarians can save food animal producers money and increase their operating efficiency by expanding services in areas such as herd nutrition, risk analysis, total quality management, environmental assessment, and artificial insemination.

Veterinarians can help cow/calf operators reduce the annual cost of feeding a cow, now estimated at $255.16 or 69% of the annual total cost of $368.24 per cow, according to Mark F. Spire, D.V.M., of Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS.

"The variable costs for veterinary medicine/drugs of $12.91 per cow pales in comparison to purchased feed costs," Dr. Spire said. He reported that 60% of Kansas food animal veterinarians are now assisting producers in forage analysis and 30% are working with producers to develop winter supplementation programs.

"Veterinarians who provide nutrition services are able to shift the emphasis of a veterinary program from one of strictly health management to a more active role in decision-making for the operation," Dr. Spire said. Nutrition services may include reconditioning programs for thin pregnant females and thin unblemished cull cows, replacement heifer development and mineral supplementation.

These services integrate well with the herd management services veterinarians are already providing, including morbidity/mortality analysis, weaning calves, inventory management, breed composition, and checking pregnancy status, according to Dr. Spire.

"Through a properly designed nutrition program, not only will the reproductive profile improve but also a marked improvement in first-calf heifer survivability can be achieved. Active participation in developing economical mineral programs can have an immediate impact on the feed dollar bottom line," he said.

From the producer's point of view, the alternative to relying on a veterinarian's advice on nutrition usually means going to someone "who has an ulterior motive," often the feed mill operator, according to Dr. Spire. Feed costs can be inflated from $10 to $150 per ton and mineral supplements from $250 to $1,000 per ton, Kansas State veterinarians have found. In one case, Dr. Spire and his Kansas State colleagues were able to save a cattle producer $7,000 annually by eliminating a 1.5% monthly interest carrying charge the mill was collecting.

Veterinarians face increasing demands for an array of new and expanded services to help the U.S. cattle industry deal with future challenges, According to Donna K. Carver, D.V.M., Ph.D., of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Centers for Epidemiology and Animal Health, Ft. Collins, Co. She covered seven major areas of change from consumer preferences to international trade.

"Veterinarians can help producers address the cattle industry's pre-harvest concern for food safety with a quality assurance approach instead of increased government regulation," Sr. Carver said. She reported on effects to reduce or eliminate risk of 0:157 and Salmonella contamination at the farm level.

Producers also seek help with environmental issues, including the threat of Cryptosporidiosis contamination of the water supply and the impact of public grazing land policies. "Veterinarians have important new opportunities as the American public's perception of U.S.D.A.'s mission evolves from 'protecting American agriculture' to 'protecting America's food supply,'" Dr. Carver said.
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