**Guide to Dental Home Care**

***When***: Start dental home care in young pets as soon as they have all of their adult teeth (generally around 6 months of age in puppies and kittens). For older pets, it is recommended to have a veterinarian perform an oral exam to make sure there is no evidence of existing dental disease. Dental home care in the presence of advanced gum inflammation, tooth fractures, or cavities is painful and unlikely to be beneficial. Dental home care is meant to prevent dental disease, not treat it. Pets with existing dental disease must first have it addressed with an anesthetized dental exam, cleaning and treatment. Wait 7 days after the anesthetized dental procedure before beginning dental home care. This gives the gum tissue time to heal so that dental home care is not uncomfortable for your pet. The only exception would be a water additive product such as Oxyfresh. Home care is best performed daily, as plaque starts to build up within only 24 hours after the teeth are cleaned. Make dental home care part of your regular routine by tying it to an existing activity, such as brushing your pet’s teeth before giving them their evening meal.

***What***: The best dental care products should have a VOHC seal of approval against plaque and/or tartar. The Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) standards for efficacy must be met for a product to carry their seal. Examples of VOHC approved products include Pet Smile Tooth Paste and OraVet Dental Chews. Physical removal of plaque with tooth brushing is ideal, followed by wipes, high quality dental chews, and dental diets. Oral rinses and water additives are the least effective dental care options, as they do not physically disrupt the plaque. Dental chews should be bendable to prevent tooth fracture. Thick rawhides can be soaked in water to soften them before giving them to your pet. Pets should always be supervised when ingesting a chew to ensure they do not attempt to swallow it whole or get it stuck in their mouths.

***Tooth Brushing Supplies:*** Use a small, soft bristled tooth brush, finger brush, or gauze wrapped finger. A Q tip can be used for cats, ferrets, or even some lizards. The Q tip can be soaked in chicken broth or tuna juice to aid in pet acceptance. Use a pet tooth paste (such as the VOHC approved Pet Smile brand). Never use a human tooth paste, as many contain xylitol and sudsing agents that should not be swallowed. Baking soda and hydrogen peroxide agents are also not recommended. Avoid allowing the pet to ingest the brush or Q tip.

***How:*** Use positive reinforcement (praise, attention, treats, food) and gradual training to acclimate your pet to the tooth brushing process. If your pet displays a negative response, back up and slow down or change your approach. If done correctly, many animals with enjoy tooth brushing. Start by stroking the head and muzzle, first with your hands, then with the tooth brush. Over several sessions, begin gradually introducing the tooth brush into the mouth. Putting treats or canned food on the brush can help with this. Work on gently lifting the lips and massaging the outer gum line (top and bottom) with the tooth brush. This is ideally done at a 45 degree angle to the teeth, with the bristles pointed toward the gum line, and the brush moved in a circular motion with gentle pressure. Practice the pressure on a ripe tomato – brush just hard enough to dent the skin but not tear it. Some pets are very compliant and will even allow you to brush the inner aspects of the teeth. For others (especially cats and ferrets), simply swiping the brush or Q tip along the outer gum line may be all they will allow. Whatever brushing the pet will allow is still beneficial to them.

***Parting words:*** Home care is not a substitute for yearly dental exams and professional cleanings. Animals that are genetically predisposed to do so can still eventually develop dental problems. However, daily dental home care is still an excellent way to prevent, slow, and/or delay periodontal disease and optimize your pet’s dental health. Good dental hygiene supports the longevity, comfort and overall health of your pet.