What to Look for When Examining Your Cat's Teeth

It's easy to recognize if your cat has a broken leg, but how about a broken tooth? You would think pets would stop eating when they had oral problems. Unfortunately, this is not usually the case. By the time most owners recognize oral disease in their pets, the problem is chronic and progressive.

So what can a loving cat owner do?

Monthly examinations of your cat's mouth are easy and can be rewarding. If you are not sure, check with your veterinarian to make sure your cat is friendly enough for a safe oral exam. It is best to place your cat on a well-lit sturdy table. Exams performed on the floor can be difficult and unrewarding. A brief oral exam should only take a minute or two. Most pets are easy to work with. If your cat growls anytime during the exam or seems irritated, it would be wise to stop.

Before opening your cat's mouth, examine the face for swelling, especially below the eyes. Frequently a broken upper fourth premolar tooth will cause an abscess that may spread below either eye. Fractures of the upper canines (fang or eye teeth) can also cause swelling on top of the nose. Next, feel around the neck below the ears. Abnormal swelling of this area can occur from infection, cancer, or inflammation.

Next, take a whiff of your pet's breath. How? Gently pull the lips back to expose the side of your pet's teeth and gums. If there is a foul odor, care is often needed. Since cats cannot brush their own teeth, gingivitis and periodontitis are the most common diseases affecting our feline friends. Reddening of the tissue where the gum meets the tooth may represent inflammation, infection, or trauma. In cases of advanced periodontitis, there may also be bleeding and discharge from the gums. Treatment of gingivitis consists of cleaning and polishing the teeth to remove built up plaque. Depending on the degree of periodontal disease, surgery may also be needed to remove pockets that develop around teeth. Daily brushing is usually easy and essential to control gingivitis.

Examine the teeth for fractures. Unfortunately, cats sometimes eat things that are not tooth friendly. If the object chewed is harder than the tooth, fracture may occur. Broken teeth with nerve exposure will usually result in an infection at the tooth's tip. Food and bacteria will travel down the root and may eventually affect your cat's heart, liver, and kidneys. Fractured teeth are treated by replacing the infected nerve with material that fills the tooth, and seals the open hole. Crowns are placed on top of the repaired teeth for protection.

Gently press on the teeth and note any movement. Loose teeth should be reported to your veterinarian. If your pet's teeth are not routinely brushed, periodontal disease and loose teeth will usually occur. Bacteria by- products under the gum line destroy the bone that holds teeth in their sockets, creating loose teeth. Eating with loose teeth can become uncomfortable for your pet. The front incisor teeth are usually affected before the back teeth. Treatment is available to try to save loose teeth.

Many cats older than 5 years old will have cavities. Cats' mouths should be examined for cavities. They commonly occur at the gum line. If your cat will allow it, gently press a cotton swab to the gum line around the outside of the teeth. If your cat starts quivering and chattering, there is probably a cavity. Cavities are painful and should be either filled or the tooth should be extracted. Oral growths may be benign or cancerous. Some tumors occur at the gum line while others are found below the tongue or on the inside of the cheeks. Hopefully, immediate care may result in a cure.

Monthly oral exams can uncover hidden disease. The more you look, the more you may find. When problems are noted, your veterinarian should be called in for a closer exam and

treatment. In the long run your cat will probably live a longer and happier life, and would thank you.