

Dental Dilemmas

The fine art of checking your cat's teeth.

Most dogs will allow you to lift a jaw and peer at their teeth without baring an eye. Try doing that to your cat, and you'll get a dirty look that implies you've mortally offended your feline. You might even get a nip to warn you never to try it again.

If you want to do a simple dental check, you need to wait patiently for your cat to wake up from a deep sleep and yawn. If you're not quick enough, you have to wait for the next big yawn — assuming the tuna breath doesn't blow you away.

It's not easy to inspect your cat's teeth. But good dental hygiene is imperative to maintaining feline health. Apart from rotting teeth, the bacteria in the mouth gets into the cat's system and can lead to severe medical problems such as kidney failure. These bacteria also can affect other vital organs such as the heart, liver and lungs.

I have February highlighted on my calendar because it's National Pet Dental Month. And, in our house, that means surreptitiously getting the carriers out for the annual trip to the veterinarian for a professional cleaning. The veterinarian usually knows we've arrived without even checking his patient list because Cali sings very loudly. I am already used to the dirty looks from other drivers at traffic lights because her vocals suggest she's being scolded.

It can be an expensive outing too, but I simply get my teeth and pay up because I know it's imperative to maintain general good health and well-being.

In fact, I was horrified when Jan Bellows, DVM, a veterinary dentist in Weston, Fla., who also happens to be one of a handful of veterinary ophthalmologists in the world, told me that 50 percent of all cats will have one recession lesion in their mouths — the first sign of painful trouble — by the time they are 3 years old.



Sometimes, the only way you'll get a good look at your cat's teeth is when they're yawning.

A recession lesion means that the tooth decays from the inside out (the opposite of what happens to humans). It can't be filled, which means that the tooth has to be extracted.

While there's a huge selection of dental mints, wipes, brushes and toothpastes on the market to encourage pet parents to regularly clean their cats' teeth, as far as I'm concerned, one very simple thing defies their efficacy: the cat itself.

I was discussing this dilemma with Bellows, who reciprocated with a very simple, almost too-good-to-be-true solution.

"Take a Q-tip," he suggests, "and dip it in tuna juice and rub it along the teeth and gums. The simple friction is enough to prevent a tartar build-up. And take it slow, even if you get a tiny bit done in one session. You can work your way around the mouth."

This technique along with tartar-prevention treats and foods that promote dental hygiene all work together to improve the state of kitty's mouth. And don't forget a regular cleaning with your veterinarian. Even though I have to endure Cali's plaintive cries, I know it's for her own good and she will be back to normal once I get her back into the house. ☺